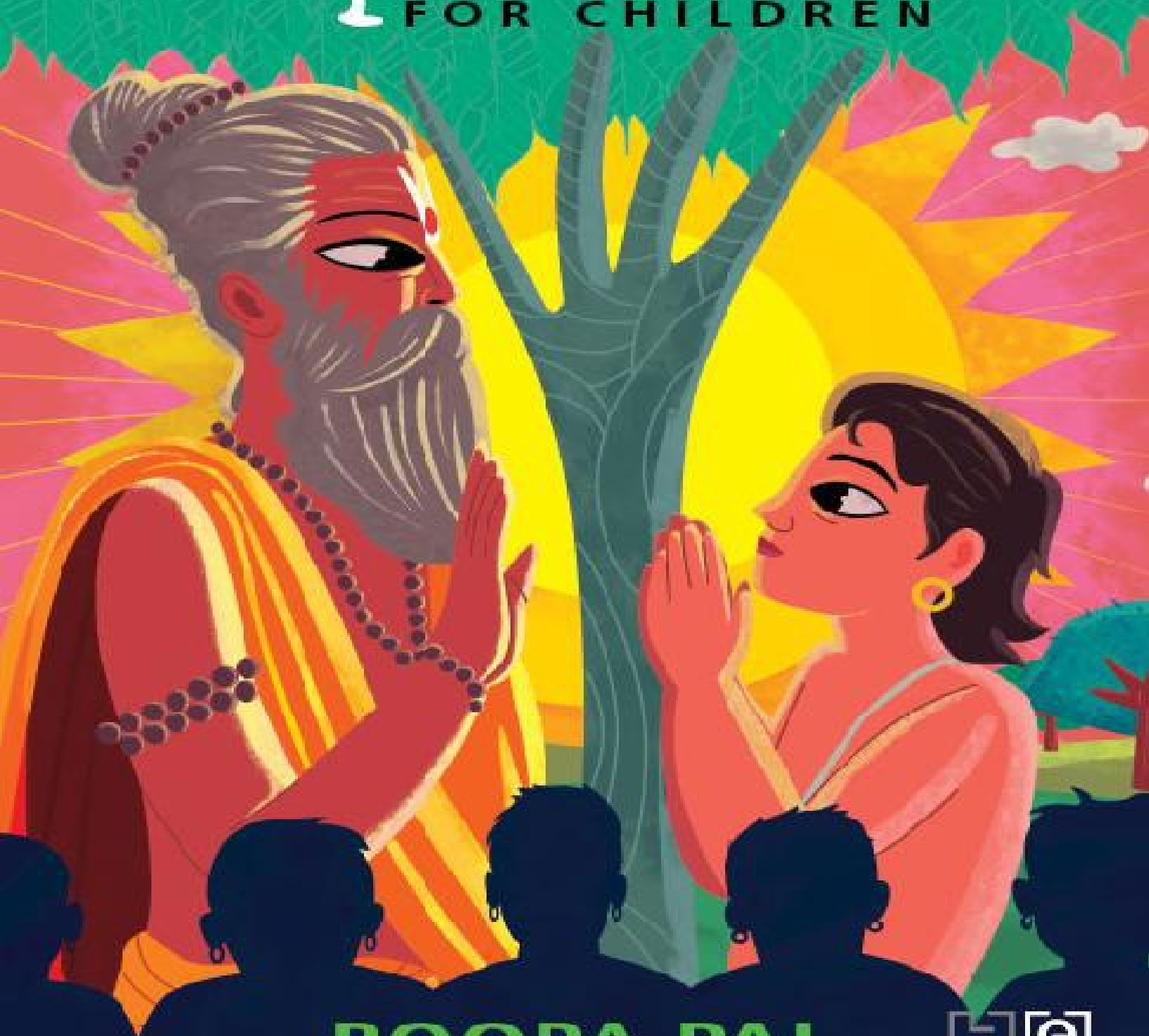


'It is not easy to communicate the gist of the Vedas and the Upanishads to children. Roopa Pai did it with the Gita, and she has done it again. Non-children should also enjoy this book.' – BIBEK DEBROY

The Vedas and Upanishads

FOR CHILDREN



ROOPA PAI

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book

The Vedas and Upanishads

FOR CHILDREN



ROOPA PAI

Illustrations by Sayan Mukherjee



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To all the readers of this book...
Don't settle for being human – discover the God
that you really are.



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BEFORE WE BEGIN

Hello, hello! It's lovely to meet you!

You are standing there (or sitting here) reading this for one of two reasons. You have either:

- (a) bought this book (or your parents have thrust it on you, believing this is an 'improving' book), OR
- (b) you are browsing through it at a bookstore or library, wondering if it's worth taking home.

Whatever your reason, chances are that, like many people, you only have a vague understanding of what the Vedas and Upanishads are. So let's very briefly 'define' the two first.

The Vedas are some of the oldest texts known to humankind. They are considered sacred texts and mainly comprise hymns of praise to the elements that sustain us – the sun, the rain, the fire, the wind, the water. Oh, and they came out of the land that we today call India. (*To get the Veda 101, flip to The Knowledge, on page 1.*)

The Upanishads are part of the Vedas, and therefore, also thought to be sacred. They are the last and newest 'layer' of the Vedas (this is India we are talking about, so even this 'new' layer was added about 2,700 years ago), but they are not hymns at all – in fact, many are stories, and / or conversations between teacher and student. And what are these stories and conversations mainly about? Unravelling the answers to very fundamental questions, the kind that human beings of all regions and races have struggled with forever. Questions that, astoundingly enough, we still have no clear answers to, despite all the progress we've made in the last 3000 years! (*To get up close and personal with the Upanishads, go to The Secret, on page 123.*)

What *are* some of these fundamental questions? Let's see now.

- Where did the universe come from?
- Who am I?
- What is the purpose of my life?
- Is there a God, and if so, who/where/in what form is He/She/It?
- What is death?
- How can I be hundred per cent happy all the time?
- How do I decide what the right thing to do is in a particular situation?

(Are these questions that bother you? If yes, keep reading!)

Of all the different answers people across the world have come up with to these questions, it seems that the old, old answers of the Upanishads are among the most convincing, for a significant number of Indians – and non-Indians – swear by them to this day. If you'd like to find out what some of those

answers are, this book is a good place to start. You can decide what YOU feel about them once you have finished reading. You may end up agreeing with the ancients, you may disagree vehemently, or you may be on the fence, BUT – get this – the sages would be happy with you whichever you are – an agree-er, a disagree-er, or a doubter!

To the agree-ers, the sages would say, ‘Glad you agree! But agreeing is not enough. You have to try out our recommendations – on the secret of happiness, say – and find out if it actually works for you. Oh, and don’t forget to come back and tell us – and everyone else – what you discover, for the point of knowledge is to share it.’

To the disagree-ers, they would say, ‘Wonderful! Why don’t *you* spend some time thinking about the same questions? Read other texts that have different answers, talk to tonnes of wise people who have other ideas, process all of it through your own head and heart – and when you think you have some answers, come back to us? We love a good debate!’

To the fence-sitters, they would say, ‘Ah, sceptics! Those who question everything, who will not believe what someone else says is the truth, who are not content until they find the answers for themselves. We totally respect your kind – as long as you just don’t sit there on that fence, but actively seek the truth yourself. We’d love to know what you find out, when you do!’

Because, you see, the sages of the Upanishads were never in the business of making other people believe what they themselves knew for a fact. Instead, they were ardent seekers of the secrets of the universe, and they were on this great quest simply to satisfy their own curiosities. Once the secrets had been revealed to their trained, disciplined minds in a sudden, unexpected flash of inspiration, however, they couldn’t wait to share them with everyone.

Here’s the remarkable part, though – these sages did not want wealth, or power, or even fame in return. In fact, so unconcerned were they about such things that they did not even attach their names to their magnum opuses, the hard-won results of their years and years of intense thought experiments!

What the sages *did* hope to achieve by sharing the secrets they had discovered was to inspire people to seek the truth for themselves. What they dearly wanted was to help their fellow humans realize that life could be a joy if it was lived the right way, and that the human spirit was limitless, chock-full of untapped power and potential.

My friends, they wanted to tell us, you are all prisoners in a ‘misery yard’, which has such high walls that you believe, mistakenly, that the yard is the world. But we – we have been beyond the walls, and we have found there a world of utter bliss. You can get there too, and guess what – you don’t even have to be dead for that to happen! All you need is the courage to commit to the journey and to all the hardships you will encounter along the way. Here, we’ve drawn you a rough roadmap to that world beyond the walls – use it!

That’s what the Upanishads are about – a rough roadmap to living in such happiness in this world that it begins to feel like Heaven itself. And this little book is a first, very basic key to the map.

So, what do you think? Feel like taking a stroll down ye olde Indian route to joy and freedom? What are you waiting for, then – turn the page!

THE KNOWLEDGE

First off, the Vedas





SO WHAT'S THE BIG DEAL ABOUT THE VEDAS?



Right. Let's kick this section off with a fun quiz, designed to test how much – if anything – you know about the Vedas. It's multiple-choice, and there's no negative marking, so just go ahead and fearlessly tick the option you think is closest to the truth. Easy-peasy!

PS: The answers come right after the questions. No peeking!



1. So what are the Vedas, anyway?

- a. The. Most. Ancient. Sanskrit. Texts. Ever. (Also, the most ancient Indian texts ever)
- b. Among the oldest existing texts in ANY Indo-European language*
- c. The most fundamental sacred texts of many Hindus
- d. A vast, and somewhat random, collection of Sanskrit poetry, philosophical stories, spells, incantations, mantras, musical notations, how-to guides for all kinds of rituals, and more
- e. All of the above

*Indo-European languages include, in order of the number of native speakers, Spanish, English, Hindustani (Hindi-Urdu), Portuguese, Bengali, Punjabi, Russian, German, French, Italian, Persian and over 400 more, including – duh! – Sanskrit. *PS: South Indian languages are among those classified as Dravidian languages.*

Did you guess (e) – all of the above? That's the right answer! Bet you got that right because you're the sort of person who picks 'all of the above' when that option exists. But that's perfectly fine – now you know what the Vedas are, somewhat.

Now, did you notice that the word 'texts' was used a lot in the answer options? You will be hearing that word a lot in this book – get used to it. Why do we have to call the Vedas texts, though? Can't we simply call them 'books' instead? Nope. Because they weren't really 'books' – no one wrote

them out or printed them on paper/birch bark/palm leaves and then bound the pages together. Not for a long, long time, anyway. Plus, the dictionary definition of ‘text’ is ‘written or printed work, regarded in terms of its content rather than its physical form’. That makes ‘texts’ the most appropriate word to describe the Vedas – and the Upanishads too – because, in the beginning – wait for it – neither had a physical form at all!

No, seriously. For almost 2,000 years, the 20,000-plus verses of the Vedas were passed from generation to generation purely via oral transmission – they were never written down! Do you realize what that means? Both teachers and students had to know them by heart! (Want to attempt that as a project for your next summer vacay?) The oldest Veda, the Rig, was probably written down for the first time as recently as 500 CE. What is even more fascinating is the accuracy with which the texts, and the ‘tunes’ they were set to, were conveyed from teacher to student. (*How did the ancients ensure that the oral transmission of their most sacred texts didn’t turn into a game of Chinese whispers? Find out in ‘Learning the Vedas by Heart (and Ear and Tongue and Mind)’ on page 14.*) It is those verses, intoned exactly as they were 3,500 years ago, that you hear at Hindu pujas, weddings and funerals, in Hindu temples, schools and homes, and in the ‘Vedic chanting’ classes now trending across the globe. Gives you the goosebumps, wot?

2. What does the word ‘Veda’ literally mean?

- a. Holy
- b. Word of God
- c. Knowledge
- d. Duty

If you ticked anything other than (c), sorry! The word ‘Veda’ does not mean Holy, or Word of God, or Duty. The root word of Veda is ‘vid’, which is also the root word of vidya, which, as you probably know, means

knowledge. (That's why this whole section is called – *ta-daa!* – 'The Knowledge'.)

3. In all, how many Vedas are there? (If you are the sort who pays attention in social sciences class, you've got this one nailed.)

- a. 16
- b. 4
- c. 9
- d. 3

Yup, (b) is the right answer. There are officially four Vedas. In chronological order, they are the Rig Veda, the Yajur Veda, the Sama Veda and the Atharva Veda (sometimes called the Atharvana Veda). Apparently, this last, the Atharva, is a bit of an interloper that sneaked in later – in the old, old texts, the Vedas are referred to as the Trayi Vidya – the three-fold knowledge, not four-fold.

4. Who 'composed' the Vedas? (Why is the word composed enclosed in quotation marks? You'll find out below.)

- a. A bunch of nameless rishis
- b. Veda Vyasa
- c. Valmiki
- d. Agastya

And the answer is... (a)! Unlike the Mahabharata, which is believed to have been composed by Vyasa, and the Ramayana, said to have been composed by Valmiki, the Vedas were put together, over centuries, by several anonymous rishis or sages. However, Vyasa (whose name literally means 'compiler') is believed to be the one who collected the vast and sprawling body of literature we know today as the Vedas. He then classified all the different, random bits of it, decided which portions went together and compiled those into chunks, and then divided those chunks into four separate

Vedas. For accomplishing this mammoth task in such an efficient, organized manner, he was given the title ‘Veda Vyasa’ – the compiler of the Vedas.

Oh, and about the quotation marks around ‘composed’. They are there because the Vedas are actually considered to be ‘authorless’ – i.e., texts that were not ‘composed’ by anyone, not even by that bunch of nameless rishis. Instead, it is believed, the Vedas were *revealed* to these rishis when they were in the kind of deep trance that is achievable only through years and years of disciplined meditation. This makes the Vedas part of what is called Shruti, or ‘heard’ literature. In contrast, other ancient Hindu texts, like the Puranas, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, are part of Smriti, or ‘remembered’ literature.

Hindus believe that Smriti texts were composed by humans, and came out of everything their authors had seen, experienced, understood and remembered. Such texts are allowed to be tweaked, edited, added to and/or rewritten all the time, since everyone’s experience is different, no one’s memory is hundred per cent accurate, and no human work is without flaws. Shruti texts, on the other hand, are believed to contain eternal, universal truths that could possibly have had divine origins. (*Divine origins? Does that mean the ancient rishis heard the Vedas being recited by a disembodied voice in the sky? Find out in ‘How to “Hear” the Song of the Universe’ on the facing page.*)

That’s why it was so important that Shruti texts be preserved exactly as they were ‘received’. Got that? Good.

5. Around how many years ago were the Vedas composed?

- a. 10,000 years ago
- b. 2,000 years ago
- c. 5,000 years ago
- d. 3,500 years ago

If your train of thought while answering this question went something like – We’ve already had a, b, c and e as the correct options in previous questions, so (d) is a dead ringer for the right answer this time, you would be on the right, um, track. The Rig Veda, the oldest of the four Vedas, has been indeed dated to circa 1500 BCE, which makes the Vedas about 3,500 years old.



LESSONS FROM THE VEDAS

HOW TO ‘HEAR’ THE SONG OF THE UNIVERSE

Fun fact: It involves sacrifices, and ancient rituals like discipline, focus and a heck of a lot of hard work

We just talked about how the Vedas are part of what many Hindus consider sacred literature called ‘Shruti’ or ‘heard’ wisdom, and how it is believed that these texts were not composed by humans at all but were revealed (via confidential sources, suspected to be divine) to certain rishis who were considered worthy of it.

How do you imagine these revelations happened? Did the rishis hear a voice from the sky speaking the Vedas, while bathing them in golden ‘God-light’? Or was it an inner voice (located approximately in the region of each rishi’s gut) that revealed the universe’s greatest secrets to him? Metaphorically speaking, neither answer is too far off the mark! It was most likely a combination of the two, happening at the same time, give or take the God-light.

What does that mean? To understand that, you must first understand who these rishis were. Very often, rishis are depicted as people who grew weary of the world and its trials and tribulations, and ‘retired’ (notice how the word ‘tired’ is already in it?) to the forests to pursue a life of meditation and quiet contemplation. But here’s the thing – true rishis were not escaping the world at all! In fact, it was the world, with its infinite wonders and apparent randomness, which fascinated and engaged them more than anything else. These men and women were intellectuals whose thoughts went well beyond the perimeter of their careers and home-fires and their own small lives. These seekers of truth had a burning desire to unlock the mysteries of the world – What is the purpose of life? What happens to us after death? Is there a God? For them, going to the forest was a huge sacrifice, but one they were very willing to make – it was a way to get away from distractions, so that they could focus all their energies on this one great quest.

When you are willing to make such big sacrifices and are so focused on your goal, all kinds of magic happens. We see examples of it all around us all the time, whether we are talking about the greatest scientists or sportspeople or musicians. Even though science is rigorous, and rational, and methodical, the greatest scientific discoveries are often made by a leap of imagination, an ‘I-feel-it-in-my-gut’ sixth sense. The world’s best sportspeople, when they are in their element, are no longer human but superhuman. The world’s best musicians are able to transport us to realms we have never dared to suspect actually exist – places where logic and rationale and science become irrelevant and only emotions abound; when the guitarist in your favourite band gets into his stride at a concert you are watching live, you scream and weep for no reason you can explain, you want to hug strangers.

When people talk about such moments, they use the word ‘inspired’ a lot – it was an inspired guess, they may say, an inspired stroke. They cannot

themselves explain how it happened – how they connected two unrelated things in a way no one had before, how they knew exactly where to position themselves for that ‘impossible’ catch on the boundary. Almost always, they are also reluctant to take credit for their idea or achievement entirely, especially because they know of so many other talented people who were working just as hard as them towards the very same goal, but did not get there. ‘It suddenly came to me,’ they say, their voices full of wonder, ‘I just knew.’

It was possibly the same with the rishis of Shruti literature. One fine day, years and years after they had begun pursuing their quest by doing all the right things – training their minds, learning to focus their energies, not checking WhatsApp more than once a year, eating right, keeping fit (hey, try sitting – or standing – in one position for hours and hours every day, meditating, and see if you can do it without eating healthy and being fit!) – they had a moment of pure inspiration. They ‘heard’ the song of the universe – the answers to the big questions came to them, they *knew*.



Exciting, right? Now for the more important question. Can you learn how to hear the song too? Can those wise rishis teach you to how to get to that flash of inspiration in whatever quest of excellence you are engaged in –

math, dancing, poetry, basketball?

Before we go there, let us try and understand what inspiration is. In the modern world, psychologists break inspiration down to a combination of **instinct** (a hardwired-in-our-DNA, natural response to the world, which all animals have, and which comes from inside); **reason** (a learned response to the world, which only humans are capable of, and comes from outside); and **intuition** (or gut-feel, or sixth sense), which is a combination of the two, a way to leap from Step A to Step E without ever going through Steps B, C and D.

The rishis of ancient India had different words to describe the same phenomenon. They preferred to think of inspiration as a benediction that came from a divine source. Was this source outside of them, or inside? For the rishis, who believed that the Universal Energy that pervades everything in the universe (Brahman) was exactly the same as the indestructible energy they carried inside themselves (Atman), the answer was a no-brainer. From both inside and outside, of course!

If you think about it, they were completely spot-on. Inspiration – for a play you are writing for your school’s annual day, your science project, a ‘fusion’ dish (like a dosaffle – dosa batter cooked in a waffle iron and topped with cinnamon-sugar and ghee) that you have just invented – comes both from outside (let’s say from current affairs, Elon Musk and *Masterchef Australia*, respectively) and inside. After all, it is in your mind that you connect something you already know (dosa) with something you’ve seen on a cooking show (waffles). Add your intuition about tastes and textures to the mix, and you bring the two together in a unique, special way.

But if someone asked you to give them a step-by-step account of how you actually came up with the idea for a dosaffle, would you be able to do it? Not really, right?

And that's why, just like a scientist cannot give you a formula for making a scientific discovery, and a musician cannot tell you exactly how to write a great piece of music, the rishis of the Upanishads do not pretend that they can teach you how to find inspiration. Like the others, they can only tell you what they did to get to that point in their own quest, caution you about the difficulties you may encounter along the way and give you tips for how to get over them, besides coaching you in technique and ritual and discipline (and diet!). They might also add an important injunction: Keep your mind open, turn your receivers on, or you may not hear the messages the universe is sending you at all! Then, with a pat on your back and a blessing on your head, they will send you on your way.

Because, you see, the long and winding road to that blinding, exhilarating stroke of inspiration – Shruti – has to be journeyed alone. *You* will have to make the sacrifices, you will have to practise the discipline, *you* will have to keep the faith. And then, maybe, just maybe, and only if you are considered worthy, you will 'hear' the universe singing to you. Maybe, just maybe, the magic will happen, and you will be rewarded with the ultimate inspiration –a brief, tantalising, breathtaking glimpse of the Brahman within you, without you.

Seems like something worth trying for, don't you think?



LEARNING THE VEDAS BY HEART (AND EAR, AND TONGUE, AND MIND)

Or, how to ensure perfect transmission of knowledge
when you can't check back with Wikipedia

How do you make sure great lessons for all humanity stay uncorrupted for thousands of years, when you can't write them down because your language has no script?

You would design a system in which only a few were entrusted with the sacred knowledge. You would put the chosen ones through years of intense training. And you would create a fail-proof (or close enough) system to ensure that they retained everything they had learnt.

And that's exactly what the Vedic seers did – they created the ultimate ancient Indian coaching class! It was called the Vedic gurukul. What were the main features of this ancient school? Read on to find out.

1. A most stringent admission process. The gurukul entrance test was tough as nails and completely transparent – gurus interviewed each candidate, evaluating each one on his inclination for hard work, ability to follow instructions and aptitude for this particular kind of rigorous study (with bonus points awarded for a naturally curious and questioning mind) before deciding which ones to pick. There was also the small matter of eligibility – only boys, and that too only brahmin, kshatriya and vaishya boys,* were eligible to apply. (Shudras were kept out of the admission process entirely. Not many girls lined up for admission either, but the thirty-one women rishis on record indicate that they were not entirely absent.)

*The four main varnas, or occupational groups – today, the word 'caste' is used to mean varna – in ancient India were the brahmins (scholars and thinkers), kshatriyas (kings and warriors), vaishyas (merchants and farmers) and shudras (craftsmen and labourers). While boys of the first three varnas went into gurukuls for their education, shudra boys – sons of potters, carpenters, weavers, goldsmiths, leather workers, sculptors and others who worked with their hands, went into 'vocational training' with their dads and uncles and learnt the family trade. Girls of all varnas learnt to cook and keep house with their mothers, apart from training in music, art and dance.

If you believe academic learning is superior to every other kind, this sounds like girls and shudras being 'relegated' to the B league. However, many modern educationists firmly believe that a 'holistic

education' is one that gives the arts and crafts as much importance as academic learning, for it creates a more equitable society, where 'makers' – sculptors, weavers, chefs – and artistes – dancers, musicians, designers – are respected just as highly, and paid as much, as professors and bankers and software engineers. Food for thought, eh?

The real downside of the gurukul system was that a lot of scary-smart girls and shudras never got the opportunity to try their luck at academics. And although some gurukuls also taught the arts and crafts, it is likely that many brahmin and kshatriya boys keen on dance and jewellery design did not find avenues to explore their creativity.

Sure, there is far less discrimination today on the basis of gender and caste in education, but overall, is the 21st century world less discriminatory than the one 3,500 years ago? What do you think?

2. Loads of extracurricular activities. Boys were admitted into the fully residential programme when they were around twelve years old, and parents were informed that they could pick up their wards from the gurukul main gate at noon, exactly twelve years later. Until then, students occupied themselves not just with studying the scriptures but also helping the guru's wife around the house, herding and milking the cows, tending to the farm and vegetable patch, collecting and chopping firewood, and serving their foster parents (did you think they were lucky to get away from annoying parents for twelve whole years? Ha! In life, there is never any getting away from parents) in whatever ways they could.

When they left the gurukul, most of the raw, unschooled twelve-year-olds had transformed into well-read, well-mannered, self-reliant young men who were proficient in debate, logic and critical analysis. They refused to accept 'facts' without examining and questioning them, but were open to changing their opinions on things as and when they came across convincing new data. They could think for themselves, live without luxuries and do all the work around the house (although they usually ended up letting their wives do it as soon as they were married).

3. Small class sizes. Most gurus took no more than twelve students every twelve years. Apart from the minor difficulty of feeding twelve growing

boys (gurukul education was absolutely free) and figuring out where they would sleep, teachers preferred a small student group so that they could give each boy their full and focused attention. Also, since a lot of learning was based on hearing – very, very clearly – every word the guru said, a small class made sense.



4. **The right learning environment.** Nope, they weren't thinking air-conditioned school buses or 'smart classrooms', actually. Gurukuls were usually located deep within quiet virgin forests, far away from the distractions of city and village life. Living and studying in the midst of nature and observing her in her many moods and seasons developed in the students a deep and enduring love for her, and a sense of oneness with the

vast and wondrous universe they were part of – which was one of the main ‘desired learning outcomes’ of Vedic education in the first place.

5. **Get the basics right.** Here’s an important fact – as far as the Vedas are concerned, it isn’t just the words but also their sounds, and tones, that are considered critical to the meaning and power of the verses (that was part of the reason they continued to be taught by a guru well after scripts were developed and the verses were written down). Since each syllable of the verses was supposed to be pronounced a particular way, sung at a particular note position and held for a particular duration, teaching students the right way to chant each hymn and mantra was vital. Once they had got this bit right, students went on to the next phase: training and disciplining their minds through – here’s the fun part – memorization* of the Vedic hymns.

Only when they had done years of this did students get to more complex stuff like logical thinking, critical analysis of texts, introspection, the art of (respectful) debate, and so on.

*Ever wonder why ‘mugging’ and doing over and replicating the teacher’s notes – to the last word – in the exams is such a big part of the Indian education system? It’s tradition – that’s the way things have been done for 3,500 years! Now you know.

6. **Patterns and sequences, tricks and techniques!** Straight-up memorization is one thing and works well if you have a good head for it, but imagine if you didn’t have a book or Wikipedia to go back to and check if you had got it right! You would have had to have some way of cross-checking the accuracy of your recitation – with yourself. After all, this was the only way to make the sacred texts available to the next generation, so the gurus had to make sure their students had it committed to memory perfectly.

And that’s why students were taught many different styles of chanting

the same mantra. In each style, the words of the mantra were strung together in different patterns. Every time a mantra was chanted, the student had to chant it in several different styles so that his memory was reinforced and not one word was ever lost.

Of the chanting styles, there were two main ones – Prakriti and Vikriti. In the Prakriti style, the words of the mantra were chanted in their natural order, with Word 2 following Word 1, Word 3 following Word 2, and so on. In the Vikriti style, the words went back and forth a bit.

Boggled? Fret not. Let's forget the Vedic mantras for a moment. Let's think about how you would recite/sing the world's most famous song – 'Happy Birthday To You' – using the Vedic chanting method.

First, let's try two methods of **Prakriti-style** chanting:

- Method 1: Samhita Patha (in which you sing the words exactly in their original order): Happy / Birthday / To / You. Straightforward enough, right?
- Method 2: Krama Patha (in which words are chanted in pairs, in the pattern 12-23-34 and so on, until the end of the mantra): Happy Birthday / Birthday To / To You. Weird, but still easy enough.



On to two methods of **Vikriti-style** chanting!

- Method 1: Jata Patha (in which words go back and forth in pairs, in the following pattern – 12-21-12 / 23-32-23 / 34-43-34 and so on, until the end of the mantra): In our example, the first line would go: Happy Birthday-Birthday Happy-Happy Birthday / Birthday To-To Birthday-Birthday To /To You-You To-To You.

Hmmm. Some serious word jugglery there, demanding a great deal of mental focus to get it right.

- Method 2: Ghana Patha (by far the most complex method, in which the words are recited in twos and threes, in the following pattern – 12-21-123-321-123, and so on – until the end of the mantra). Here's how the first line of 'Happy Birthday' would go: Happy Birthday-Birthday Happy-Happy Birthday To-To Birthday Happy-Happy Birthday To / Birthday To-To Birthday-Birthday To You-You To Birthday-Birthday To You.

Say whaaaaaa??

Now for the big question. What's the point of concentrating so hard to recite words in the wrong order when they don't even make sense that way? Well, the main point, of course, is the ability to check back with a different pattern to make sure you have all the words of a mantra. But there is another, equally important, point.

You see, when you focus hard on something, like getting words to fit into a complex pattern, your mind becomes completely occupied. Since the words don't make sense when they are not said in order, your mind simply cannot go into auto-pilot. Closing your eyes – i.e., cutting off the external stimuli coming to you through one of your sense organs – helps focus your mind even further. In that moment of deep absorption, you see nothing but the patterns, hear nothing but your own voice repeating powerful and mystical words (and we don't mean Happy Birthday!) over and over again, in the prescribed notes of the musical scale.

If you think about it, it is the perfect practice for learning to turn your awareness inwards, for training the mind to be (at least briefly) still. And while a still mind is the hardest thing to achieve, the Vedic seers tell us it is also the first step towards getting to know yourself as you really are, to finding the most powerful, most divine part of yourself. When you have made that connection, the ancients tell us, all your energies will converge, with laser-like precision, to help you achieve your goal, whatever it is.

Right. So just because they say that, it is your duty to believe them? Naaah. It would make those rishis much happier if you tried this mind-focusing thing for yourself before you agreed (or disagreed) with them. They have done their bit by sharing their mind-blowing, transcendental experiences with you, and by devising all kinds of clever ways to ensure that the knowledge comes to you intact, over millennia. Now the ball is in your court. Toss it up, dribble it around, lob it back, let it lie – the choice is entirely yours

to make.

२

NATURE SONGS OF THE CATTLE-HERDERS

A brief introduction to the composers of India's all-
time greatest hits



Surprising as it may seem to us today, the Vedas, which are the oldest and among the most beautiful hymns to the nature gods that we have, did not come to us from a society of scholars who had read fat books, maxed their exams, or graduated from universities. They came instead from simple people who lived close to the land, slept under the stars, and had a close connection with their horses and dogs, and the sheep, goats and cattle that they herded.

Who exactly were these people? Where did they come from? No one is hundred per cent sure – after all, we’re talking about people who lived 3,500 years ago. What’s more, these people did not believe in permanence – they did not write things down, draw pictures on rocks for us to puzzle over thousands of years later, or build anything that would last a century, leave alone millennia. They only left us their words, thousands and thousands of them, and their thoughts – about how the universe worked and what the purpose of human life was and why we should not be afraid of death. And they made pretty darn sure that we would get to hear all those words and all those thoughts (well, a LOT of them, anyway) long after they had composed them, by not putting them down on perishable material like paper or bark or cloth; instead, they put them in the best safekeeping boxes in the world – people’s memories.* All we know, or think we know, about these people comes from analyzing these words and thoughts.

*Yes, yes, we know – human memory is notoriously unreliable. But the guardians of the sacred knowledge – the Chosen Ones – were those whose ordinary minds had become extraordinary simply through the unwavering discipline and training their owners had put them through. Remember Sherlock Holmes’s ‘Memory Palace’, a many-tiered RAM in his head, organized and catalogued so finely that he could always reach for one particular memory and pull it out when he needed it? Yup, this was that kind of thing, except there wasn’t just one ‘born genius’ like Holmes in ancient India, there were hundreds, who had become ‘geniuses’ through practice.

And what have we figured out so far? There are conflicting theories, but

one of the most popular ones over the last few decades is that these people were horse-riding tribes of nomadic goatherds and cattle-herders from Central Asia (the area roughly occupied by today's Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan) who found their way to India (specifically the Punjab and its surrounds) around 1500 BCE. In their literature, these tribes referred to themselves as Arya (say aar-ya) – 'the noble ones'.

Experts who lean towards this theory believe that the reason that Arya tribes left Central Asia was because overgrazing and drought had made their original homelands, the grasslands called the steppes, unlivable for themselves and their animals. To ensure less crowding and better opportunities for all in their search for new pastures, they say, the Arya split up. One branch went east towards Mongolia, one west towards Anatolia (Turkey) and one south towards Bactria (the area north of the Hindu Kush mountains). From Bactria, the Arya divided again, one branch moving west towards Iran, and the other east towards India. This second branch – whose people these experts refer to as the Indo-Aryans or the Indo-Iranians – settled first in the Punjab and later in the Gangetic plains.

The timing of the grand entrance of these mystery people – the Arya – onto the Indian history stage is crucial. We first encounter them around the same time that the people of the Harappan Civilization – who had lived and thrived on the banks of the Indus and her tributaries in the Punjab for over a thousand years – abandoned their vast, flourishing cities and mysteriously disappeared. (*Want to know a little more about the Harappans? Check out 'Pashupati's People' on page 54.*)

This little detail leads to the other popular theory, this one more recent, about the origin of the Arya. What if the chariot-driving, horse-riding, dog-loving, weapon-wielding Arya were not foreigners at all, but Harappans

themselves who had quit their riverside cities after a great flood and spread out across northern India and further west and east, to re-emerge centuries later as the composers of the Vedas? Or what if they were an entirely different indigenous set of Indian people?

Let us leave that question to the scholars and academics to wrangle over. What is not disputed is that it was the Arya who introduced the Iron Age into India (the Harappans had only known the use of the softer bronze and copper) and that it was also they who gave India and the world the oldest of the languages in the Indo-European family of languages, the perfectly formed ‘mother language’ Sanskrit. (That isn’t an exaggeration, by the way; the anglicized name for the language – Sanskrit – actually comes from the words ‘samskruta’, which literally means ‘perfectly formed’! In fact, in the beginning, ‘samskruta’ was the *adjective* used to describe the language of the ancient texts – the language itself was simply called ‘bhasha’, or language. So ‘samskruta bhasha’ simply meant ‘the perfectly formed language’.)

As the pastures in the north-west were consumed and the rivers that sustained their crops changed course or dried up because of changes in climate, the Arya, having now split into five main tribes, began to move slowly east across northern India. Over the next thousand years, they colonized the Doab – the fertile land between the two great rivers Ganga and Yamuna – and became farmers. Each Arya tribe split into clans as they went along, fighting each other to establish their own little areas of control, called janapadas. By the 6th century BCE, the many little janapadas had been consolidated into sixteen larger ‘kingdoms’ called mahajanapadas, which stretched between the Himalayas in the north and the Vindhyas in the south, and from the western (Arabian) sea to the eastern sea (the Bay of Bengal). The Arya referred to their new land as Aryavarta (say aar-yaa-varta) – Abode of the Noble Ones.

One of the mahajanapadas was Kuru (does that name ring a bell?), which, the Mahabharata tells us, was the land of the... yup, the Pandavas and the Kauravas! Another was faraway Gandhara, in today's Afghanistan, from where the beautiful princess Gandhari was brought to Kuru as the bride of the blind prince Dhritarashtra. A third was Kosala, the kingdom of the Ikshvakus, whose most famous king was... right, Rama from the Ramayana! There was also the mahajanapada of Magadha, from where Ashoka Maurya and the Guptas ruled, and that of Kashi, with its holy cities of Varanasi (revered as a pilgrimage centre for thousands of years) and Sarnath (where Buddha gave his first sermon).*

*Isn't this all a bit confusing? Weren't Ashoka and the Guptas people who actually existed while Rama and the Kuru princes were merely characters in stories? Well, here's the thing – Hindus classify the Ramayana and Mahabharata not under the Puranas, which are considered stories, but under a separate genre called Itihasa (from iti-ha-asa – Sanskrit for 'this is how it happened'), or history. Even though they accept that every single event mentioned in the epics may not have happened exactly in that way, they firmly believe that the main thread of the narratives describes real events, people, kingdoms and dynasties.

But back to the Arya. The Arya tended not to stay in the same place for too long, at least in the beginning. Their on-the-go lifestyle made it somewhat pointless for them to build great cities or temples or palaces, and it seems they truly did not care for such things.** After all, the scholarly ones among them carried all they needed to know in their heads, and as for the others, their greatest wealth – horses and cattle – were fully capable of moving with them.

**Well-planned cities and a script (that we haven't yet been able to decipher) were two hallmarks of the Harappan Civilization. Considering that such an advanced civilization had been around in India for a thousand years before the Arya appeared on the scene, it seems somewhat insane that we would have to wait another thousand years after that for other cities to be built and a new script to be developed. But from all the evidence we have so far, that seems to be what happened!

What the Arya did care about, however, was pleasing their gods. Like all

other early agrarian civilizations, they lived equally in awe of the formidable power and beauty of Mother Nature, and fear at her capriciousness. Naturally, just like the Egyptians, Chinese and Mesopotamians, they turned the elements – the sun, the earth, the rain, the rivers, the dawn, the thunder – into gods, and set about composing extravagant hymns of praise to each one. After all, if the gods were not kept happy, how could the Arya hope to ensure that the rain fell at the right time and the rivers did not flood (or dry up!) and the sun shone just so and the earth gave forth enough of herself to sustain their crops, their animals and themselves? *(Who were the gods of the Arya? Are they the same gods Hindus worship today? Find out in Chapter 3: ‘The Gods of Big Things’ on page 42.)*

Realizing that, at the end of the day, even the most flattering praise was merely lip service, and the gods would probably expect something more solid, the Arya devised elaborate sacrifices called yagnas. There were different yagnas to wrest different boons – long life, success in war, a bountiful harvest, many fine sons – from the gods, but they were all accompanied by the chanting of songs of praise and they were almost always conducted in the presence of the sacred fire, Agni. Into Agni’s all-consuming maw went the various offerings – ground rice, cooked pulses, milk, soma *(Soma? Wozzat? To find out, check out “‘Theobroma” Soma – Elixir of the Gods’ on page 38)*, and the all-important ghrita, aka desi ghee (and you wondered why ghee is such an indispensable ingredient in the Indian kitchen!) – that were believed to please the gods.

In the beginning, animal sacrifices were also a huge part of yagnas. Thousands of animals, including cattle and horses (these animals were dearest and most precious to the Arya, so giving them up to the gods was a huge sacrifice), were offered to the gods.

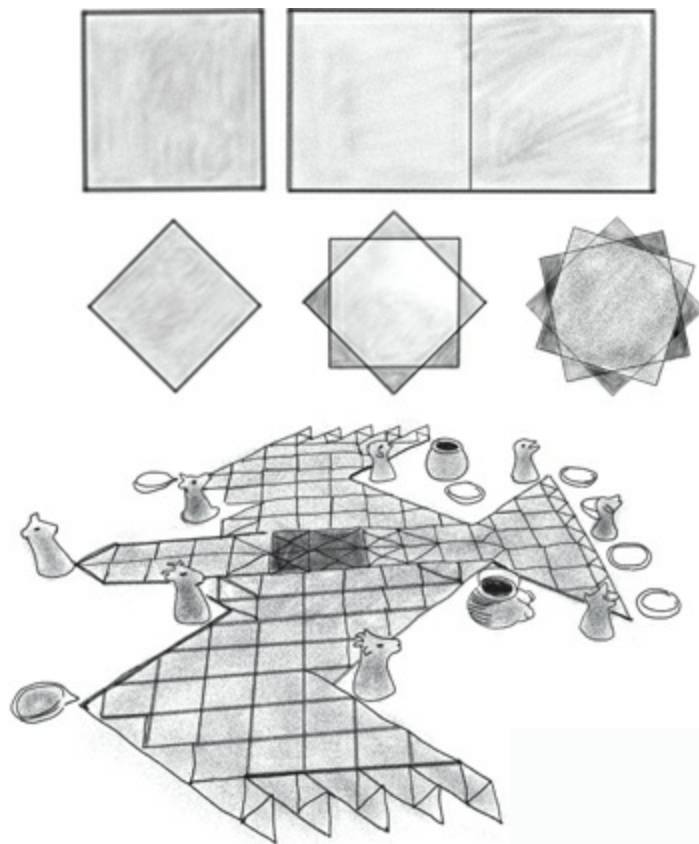


Phew. Yagnas sound like a serious amount of work, right? But the payback was worth it – if a yagna was done right, Agni the divine messenger would ensure that the offerings were conveyed dutifully to the gods being propitiated, leaving them with no choice but to rain the right blessings down on the earthly petitioners. (Yup, that was the belief then – you had the power to persuade the gods to do what you wanted, assuming you performed all the prescribed rituals in the correct way!)

Now, how could the yajamana (say yaja-maana) – the king or merchant who hosted the yagna and provided all the money needed for the firewood, the offerings, the sacrificial animals and everything else – ensure that the yagna was conducted in exactly the right way? He requested the scholars, the ritual experts who knew all the mantras by heart, to come and officiate at the ceremonies. For this service, he paid them a generous fee. Simple!

So if worship and yagnas were such a big part of Arya life, didn't they require, like the Egyptians, special temples where sacred ceremonies could be conducted? Nope. Whether the yagna was a small private one for one's immediate family or a ginormous community one with thousands of people

attending, all it required, apart from a sacrificial post where animals could be butchered, was a yagna kunda, a fire altar, which was a pit to contain the firewood and oilseeds that sustained the sacred fire for the duration of the ceremony. Pits were built and consecrated (i.e., made pure for worship by the sprinkling of holy water, the chanting of mantras and other rituals) just before the yagna, and must have been dismantled soon after, since no remains of ancient fire altars have ever been found (these people were clearly sticklers for the 'Leave No Trace' policy that modern conservationists urge us to follow when we go camping and hiking).



Yagna kunds were of many different shapes that were variations of the square

The square was considered to be the sacred geometrical shape for the kunda. But instead of settling for a simple square, the Arya played around with the basic shape to come up with all kinds of interesting variations – a

kunda could be a right-angled rhombus (a square standing on one of its corners), a rectangle (two squares placed side by side), a set of triangles (each of which was a square cut in half), or a many-pointed star (which, if you think about it, is nothing but a rotating square). The most interesting shape that we know of, used for the most important yagnas, and built out of a specified number of bricks, each made to specified dimensions (ancient Indians were nothing if not nerdy, especially where numbers were concerned) was the hawk- or falcon-shaped altar.*

*Can you come up with your own cool shapes for yagna kundas, using just squares? To make it more challenging, try and come up with patterns in which the number of squares used is a multiple of nine – nine squares, or eighteen, or twenty-seven, or 108... Nine was a number sacred to the Arya, so any number whose digits added up to nine also made the cut. Try it!

As different groups of people developed expertise in different skills, Arya society divided itself into four divisions, or classes, called varnas. Those who knew the Vedas and the rituals became the priests – they were called the brahmins. Clan leaders who defended the tribe, protected their cattle, fought wars and hosted yagnas for the well-being of their people became, along with the soldiers they led, the warrior class – they were called the kshatriyas. The farmers who grew the crops that sustained their people and the merchants who carried the grain to distant lands for trade, thus filling the coffers of the tribe and ensuring there was enough money for yagnas and wars, were the third band – they were called the vaishyas. Those who worked with their hands, creating useful and/or artistic products out of leather and gold and wood and clay and iron, or serving the people of the three other classes – as charioteers, grooms for horses, lady's maids, cooks, butchers, and so on – formed the fourth group: they were called the shudras.

The brahmins were intellectuals who thought deep thoughts and knew the Vedas verbatim. But they had very few practical skills for earning a

livelihood. In order to survive, they smartly forged an alliance with the ones who wielded the real power – the kings. Since it was the duty of the king to conduct yagnas, and no yagna could be performed without someone (usually, several someones) who knew the Vedas officiating, the brahmins (who were the smallest varna in terms of numbers) ensured that they were always employable.

It is easy to see how these two varnas – comprising the Smart Ones and the Powerful Ones – raced to winner and runner-up positions, respectively, on the varna podium.

Of course it was money that made the world go round even then, and the people who controlled that part were the vaishyas. They zoomed into third place in the varna race, leaving the shudras far behind at fourth place.

And thus it came to pass that a society whose divisions had originally been based simply on the kind of work people did, with no one group considered higher or lower than any other, turned into one in which one or more divisions (today we call them ‘castes’) lorded it over the others, claiming that the ‘lower’ castes neither could nor should ever aspire to do the jobs of the ‘higher’ castes. For instance, in later Arya society, a butcher’s son was stuck with being a butcher for life, never mind how capable he himself was of committing the Vedas to memory, simply because no one would agree to teach them to him!*

*Remember the story from the Mahabharata where the great Acharya Drona refused to accept a boy called Ekalavya as his student, simply because he came from the Nishada tribe, whose people were hunters and fishermen? It didn’t even matter to the Acharya that Ekalavya was a prince of his tribe, for Drona was far too busy teaching kshatriya princes, the ‘real’ blue bloods. And when Ekalavya went on to display the kind of mastery of his craft that made him a threat to Drona’s favourite student Arjuna? Shudder! You know how that story ended.

What’s more, the dominant varnas claimed that this kind of discrimination was authorized by the Vedas – and therefore the gods –

themselves. As you can imagine, that kind of claim was incredibly easy for them to get away with, because only the brahmins knew the Vedas in the first place – everyone else simply had to believe what they said, or have the wrath of the gods – and the priests – visited upon their heads.

It was possibly partly to question and challenge this kind of patent unfairness that had crept into Arya society that the Upanishads were composed, beginning circa 7th century BCE. The sages of the Upanishads sat down, re-examined the Vedas and returned declaring that the true message of the Vedas was that all creatures were equal, since they were all simply manifestations of the same Universal Energy. They suggested that many things mentioned in the Vedas were not meant to be taken literally, but metaphorically. Sacrifice your ego, said the Upanishads, not animals; offer hard work and dedication to the sacred fire inside you, instead of soma and ghrita into a real fire. And rest assured that this kind of yagna will make the gods just as happy and the rewards that flow down to you as a result just as generous.

While the Upanishads attempted to reform the Arya religion from the inside, two other movements that came up soon after took the opposite route. They rejected many things about the Arya religion (the Vedas, the yagnas, the animal sacrifices, the caste system) while still retaining some of its core beliefs, broke away, and became two new religions. These religions also believed in ahimsa (non-violence) and the equality of all creatures. They were called – you guessed it! – Jainism and Buddhism.

In the centuries after, the Vedic religion of the Arya, now revived by the wisdom and liberal ideas of the Upanishads, crossed the Vindhya and made its way into the southern peninsula, taking with it Vedic chants and rituals, and the Sanskrit language. As its influence spread beyond Aryavarta, it sprawled and proliferated like a great banyan, putting down roots as it went,

and inviting all the gods, goddesses, beliefs, philosophies, practices and traditions it encountered along the way to come and set up home under its vast and generous canopy. By and by, over centuries, it metamorphosed into the chaotic, glorious, impossible-to-define and uniquely Indian celebration of unity in diversity that we now call Hinduism.*

Hinduism is still a work in progress, one that is being ceaselessly reformed, reinterpreted, revised, recast, and yes, challenged, by anyone who wants to have a go – gurus, politicians, academics, film-makers, artists, philosophers, historians and any number of common people. And while it has changed immeasurably as it has grown and spread, perhaps the most remarkable thing about this old, old religion-that-isn't-really-a-religion** is how much of it has remained the same over the last 3,500 years.

Agni is still the witness and the acceptor of offerings at yagnas conducted as part of Hindu religious ceremonies (if you have ever attended a Hindu wedding, you have been witness to a yagna!), the yagna kunda is still a simple portable container (most people now prefer to stick with a straightforward square), priests are still invited to officiate at important religious events, ancient Vedic mantras (yup, the same songs of praise we talked about earlier) are still chanted at modern-day ceremonies, and very few people (apart from the priests) still understand what is being chanted!

You see why those ancient cattle-herders, whoever they were, were absolute rock stars? They gave this land a set of all-time greatest hits whose staying power is yet to be beaten!

* Yes! The term 'Hinduism' is fairly new – it was used (by the British) to describe the many variants of the Vedic religion of the Arya only as recently as the 19th century. In fact, the word 'Hindu' itself is a Persian word that the ancient Greeks and Persians used to describe the people and the land beyond the River Sindhu (which, in Persian, was pronounced Hindu) – it was never meant to denote people of a particular religion. This might come as a surprise, but in the Vedas and Upanishads, the word Hindu is never used.

As for Hindus themselves, many often refer to their core belief system as 'Santana Dharma' – the

eternal law – a timeless, universal code of ethics and duties that they, regardless of caste, creed and sect, are bound to follow.

** Unlike most other formal religions in the world today, belief in God is not central to Hinduism – one can be a good Hindu even while questioning the existence of God. Plus, it does not have a founder, or a single leader of the faith, or one particular God, or one particular holy book. There is no time of day or day of the week when Hindus are supposed to gather and pray, and no ‘house of worship’ that they are bound to visit regularly. As for scriptures and gurus, Hindus are only expected to use them as wise guides to help them discover the truth for themselves.



‘THEOBROMA’ SOMA – ELIXIR OF THE GODS

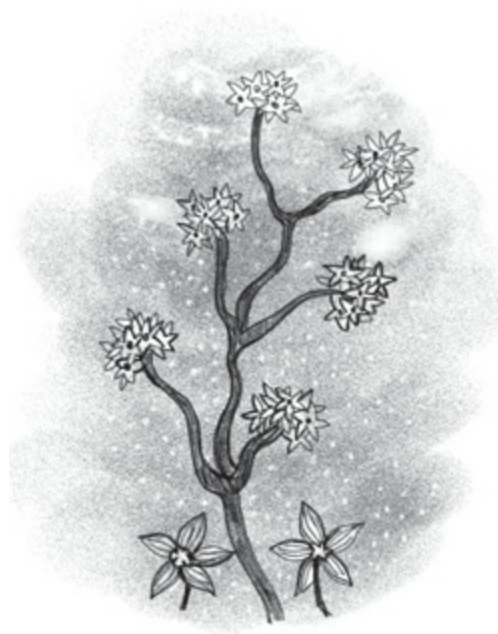
Including: Why 21st century gods no longer have an all-access pass to this most divine of all drinks

Whoever gave the cacao plant its Latin name was clearly smitten by its best-loved product, chocolate. He, or she, named the plant *Theobroma* (literally, ‘food of the gods’) *cacao*. If the modern method of botanical classification had been around during Vedic times, there was surely only one plant that would have earned that ecstatic descriptor – the mountain plant, soma, from which was produced the (possibly intoxicating and/or hallucinogenic) ritual drink, soma, which was worshipped as a god called (what else but) Soma.

Soma (both the god and the drink) was vital to every yagna, for it was the favourite drink of Indra, Lord of the Heavens and the No. 1 god in the Arya pantheon (*So Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva were not the No. 1 Vedic gods? Nope. They were seriously minor gods then. For more details on gods old and new, see ‘Who or What did the Arya worship? Element-ary!’ on page 45*). Copious quantities of soma were offered to Indra by pouring it into the yagna fire, while the even more copious quantities left behind, after having

been 'blessed' by the gods, were consumed by the mantra-chanting priests, the yajamana and his guests, and anyone else who had the right connections.

As you can imagine, both Soma and soma were exceedingly popular – after all, the brew was supposed to confer immortality (or at least the feeling of being immortal) on the drinker, as well as improving vitality and vigour in 'body, mind and intellect', and bestowing on him the ability to see the 'light of the gods'. It would have been great to test its powers for ourselves; tragically, we simply have no idea how to brew a draught of soma today.



Sarcostemma acidum, a Himalayan plant identified by some as being used in soma

Considering that so many Vedic rituals and chants and beliefs have survived until the present day, it is a real shame that the recipe for soma hasn't. While the Rig Veda indicates clearly that it was a plant product, made by (1) extracting the juice from the leaves and/or stalks of a certain mountain plant, (2) purifying it by straining through a cloth, and (3) mixing it with curd or milk, flour, water and perhaps honey, no one has so far been able to conclusively identify the mystery plant itself! We are also told that soma

achieved its full potential when the juice was extracted from plants gathered by moonlight (sounds like something out of a witch's recipe book, right?), which was probably why the Arya eventually promoted Soma the god of the drink to Soma the moon god.*

How did we entirely lose the knowledge of this fabulous plant? After all, Indians – especially Indian grandmothers – have always had a deep knowledge of all kinds of healing, nourishing and revitalizing herbs and spices. That wisdom has come down to us in two ways – one, via texts related to Ayurveda, the Indian system of medicine (which is enjoying a huge resurgence today); and two, by word-of-mouth transmission across the generations. The fact that no knowledge whatsoever exists on the soma plant is puzzling, and probably indicates that the plant wasn't local at all, but imported from somewhere far away in the Hindu Kush mountains, specifically for the purposes of the Vedic yagnas, until the whole thing became too unviable for one reason or another.

Once the original plant became unavailable, the Arya began to use a substitute from the Himalayas – most scholars think it likely that it was a plant called somalata – for their yagnas. Somalata has similar (but not identical) effects on the body and mind as soma, which is why it continues to be used as an offering at yagnas even today.

*Many ancient cultures had a god of intoxicants in their pantheon. The Greeks, for instance, had a god of the grape harvest, wine-making and wine, who was very popular. Do you know his name? The Romans knew the same god by a different name. Do you know what his Roman name was?

Ans: Greek god of wine: Dionysus; Roman god of wine: Bacchus



THE GODS OF BIG THINGS

Roarers and healers, slayers and protectors, sustainers
and devourers, the Arya revered them all



If you were part of a nomadic cattle-herding people who conducted their entire lives in the lap of nature – waking each day to a glorious sunrise, retiring to bed as another beautiful sunset painted itself into a starry, starry night in the upturned bowl of the sky above, watching lightning split the dark sky in a spectacular storm as you hurried to shelter with your flock under a rocky overhang, dancing in abandon when rain-bearing clouds gathered and burst above your head, filling the rivers after a particularly merciless summer – where would you look for your gods? In those very elements, of course! And that’s exactly what the Arya did.

The Arya believed that our universe was just one of the many universes that made up the multiverse. In their minds, our universe was divided into three ‘planes’ or lokas – Bhuh, Bhuvah and Svah. Bhuh was the earth, Svah the sky and Bhuvah the space in between the two. There were gods in each of these three lokas – the fire, earth and the rivers were all Bhuh deities; the wind, rain clouds, thunder and lightning were gods who inhabited Bhuvah; and the sun, moon, the dawn and the stars were the gods who looked down on them from Svah. By and by, though, the Arya ended up sending all their gods up to Svah.

Considering that the Arya composed the Vedas and the Upanishads, which are the main scriptures of the religion we know as Hinduism, were the gods of the Arya the same as the gods the Hindus revere today? Yes and no. While a few Vedic gods, like Mitra and Ushas, are all but forgotten today, others, like Indra, who were all-powerful and top-of-the-heap then, are now treated as minor gods. On the flip side, gods like Vishnu, who languished way down the god hierarchy in Vedic times, have zoomed to its highest rungs today. As you can see, the theory of evolution applies to gods and goddesses as well –they evolved too, depending on the whims, concerns and aspirations of the humans who worshipped them.

Words used to describe gods have evolved as well. One of the most startling evolutions has been in the meaning of the word ‘asura’. Today, we understand the word asura as demon – a stereotypically dark-skinned and malevolent being who causes chaos in the world and trouble in the heavens. We see asuras today as the negative counterparts of the fair-skinned, sweeter, nobler suras, or devas. The ancient Arya, however, saw asuras quite differently. To them, all their gods, including their chief god Indra, were asuras. There were good ones and bad ones (and fair-skinned ones and dark-skinned ones, one would imagine) among them, but asura* simply meant a powerful, superhuman being who could bring joy or destruction to humanity.

*In fact, this is one of the linguistic ‘clues’ that historians who believe that the Arya came into India from outside use to support their theory. Ancient Persian, the language of the Zoroastrian holy book, the Zend Avesta, has several words in common with Vedic Sanskrit. Only, in Persian, the ‘s’ sound is replaced with the ‘h’ sound – the drink soma in the Vedas becomes ‘haoma’ in the Zend Avesta, for instance, and Sapta Sindhu, the group of seven sacred rivers in the north-west of India, becomes Hapta Hindu. This similarity of language, say experts, is one strong indication that both the Iranians (who were Zoroastrian) and the Arya originated in the same place in Central Asia. Even the two religions were similar – both involved fire worship. Now, with all this background info, can you guess where the first part of the name of the almighty Zoroastrian god, Ahura Mazda, came from? That’s right – Asura!

WHO OR WHAT DID THE ARYA WORSHIP? ELEMENT-ARY!

Now, who were the main gods and goddesses of the Arya? The best indication of ‘god popularity’ comes from the 1,028 sukta (hymns) of the Rig Veda, the oldest and bulkiest of all the four Vedas – the more hymns addressed to a particular god, the more popular, or higher up in the god hierarchy, he or she was. Based purely on that yardstick, here are the ‘main’ Arya gods and goddesses.

- **Indra** – Heroic friend of mankind, Lord of Heaven, god of rain and storms, lover of soma, wielder of the thunderbolt Vajra, and slayer of demons,

Indra held a very special place in the Arya heart. His chief nemesis was Vritra, the dragon of drought, who took great pleasure in blocking the flow of rivers. Vritra's brother Vala was no less a foe – he specialized in turning himself into a stone cave around the cows that his allies, the mischievous Panis, stole from the Arya.

Whenever Indra destroyed Vritra, the waters of the celestial river (the Milky Way, or the Akash Ganga, was believed to be the original celestial river from where waters flowed down to fill earthly rivers) were released to earth as rain. When he split Vala in two, the stolen cows were released to make their joyful way back to their rightful owners. In fact, this is why the Vedas sometimes use cows as a symbol for clouds. The 'liberation of cows' is a metaphor for the release of rain from the clouds. Whichever interpretation you pick, Indra was a superhero!

Sadly, his fondness for soma and beautiful apsaras, and his insecurity about human sages whom he feared would become more powerful than him, seem to have weakened Indra's powers and lost him the respect of the Arya. Slowly but surely, the most beloved Vedic god fell off his mighty pedestal and became one of the minor Hindu gods.

- **Agni** – As the divine messenger who conveyed human offerings and prayers to the gods, Agni was believed to inhabit all three lokas – in Bhuh he was fire, in Bhuvah lightning and in Svah the sun. All offerings to the gods were made into his all-consuming 'mouth' here on earth. Agni continues to be present at all Hindu weddings and yagnas today as the acceptor of offerings and the witness of the gods, but he doesn't enjoy the kind of wild popularity he did in Arya times, when he was the first god to be propitiated at every yagna.
- **Soma** – The favourite drink of Indra – and of the Arya – was venerated as a god by itself. No less than 123 of the Rig Vedic hymns are dedicated to

this divine brew. Later, perhaps because of how difficult it was to obtain the plant from which soma was made, the name soma was given to the moon, and a new god, Soma, was created.

- **The Ashvins** – Twin horsemen, who were the sons of the sun and the clouds, the Ashvins represented the similar but not identical glows of sunrise and sunset. They protected humans from misfortune and sickness, and were believed to be the doctors of the gods. Centuries later, they were ordained as the patron gods of Ayurveda, the Indian science of healing.



The Ashvins, healers of the gods

- **Varuna** – Lord of the Seas, rivers and the waters, Varuna was an asura with serious anger-management issues. (If you have ever seen a stormy sea, you know where that association came from.) Varuna was rarely

mentioned alone in the Vedas, though – he was part of a twin identity called Varuna-Mitra. Mitra was the gentler side of Varuna, the Dr Jekyll to Varuna’s Mr Hyde, the friend that humans could appeal to when they wanted the temperamental god’s blessings. Even though Mitra is no longer venerated as a god, his spirit lives on in the Sanskrit word for friend – mitra. Varuna–Mitra’s other big responsibility was maintaining order, or rita, in the universe – things like making sure that the sun rose, the earth turned, the seasons changed, the tides rose and fell like clockwork, and so on.

- **The Maruts** – The sons of Rudra and Diti, the Maruts (also called the Rudras) were violent storm gods who roared like lions as they wielded their weapons of lightning and thunderbolts. Another set of Diti’s sons were called Daityas (who became the ‘bad’ asuras), while her sister Aditi’s sons, the Adityas, grew up to be the ‘good’ asuras.
- **Ushas** – The most exalted goddess of the Vedic Arya, second only to Indra, Soma and Agni, beautiful Ushas was the Goddess of the Dawn. Each morning, as she rode across the sky from east to west in her golden chariot drawn by cows or red horses, paving the way for Surya the sun god, she chased away the demons of darkness, roused everyone and everything from slumber, set things in motion and sent everyone off to do their duties. In other words, Ushas was Supermom. (Who was Ushas’s sister? Yup, Ratri, the night!)



Ushas, the Goddess of the Dawn

- **Savitr** – One of the ‘Adityas’ or sons of Aditi, Savitr, or Savita, is a form of Surya, the sun god. Savitr is supposed to be that part of Surya that infuses life into things, and he was a highly revered god in Vedic times. Over the millennia, however, Savitr was forgotten as a deity. But Hindus evoke his name very often, even though they may not realize it, in a very popular hymn from the Rig Veda that is chanted to this day. Can you guess which one?*

*The Gayatri Mantra! The first line of the mantra goes ‘Tat Savitur varenyam’ – We meditate on that Savitr! Oh-kay, but why is the mantra called the Gayatri then – shouldn’t it be called the Savitri? *Find the answer on page 72.*

- **Vayu** – He was the Lord of the Winds then, and continues to be the Lord of the Winds today. ‘Wind’ did not mean just atmospheric wind, though – Vayu was also the ‘wind’ in all living things, the very breath of life, or prana.



Vayu, the Lord of the Winds

- **Brihaspati** – To the ancient Arya, Brihaspati was a wise sage who was counsellor to the gods and the guru of the devas (or the good asuras). Today, we also know him as the planet Jupiter and the god of Brihaspati-vaar, or Thursday.
- **Dyaus Pitr and Prithvi Mata** – The parents of everything contained on heaven and earth, Dyaus Pitr (say dhowsh-pitruh) can be translated as Sky Father and Prithvi Mata as Earth Mother. Given that Sanskrit is among the oldest of the Indo-European languages, and remembering that Dyaus Pitr is a heavenly father, can you guess what the Greek version of his name was? Zeus Pater – Father Zeus! And what planet's name do you think Zeus Pater inspired? Jupiter, of course!
- **Apas** – In Sanskrit, the word apas literally means 'the waters'. Whether as rivers, rain or the sea, the waters were deities by themselves to the ancient Arya. Apas, together with Vayu (air), Agni (fire), Prithvi (earth) and Dyaus or Akash (space) were the five elements – the Panchabhuta – that

the Arya believed made up everything in the world, including the human body.

- **Vishnu** – With only six sukta dedicated to him in the Rig Veda, Vishnu in the Vedic Age was nowhere near being the Supreme Being that Hindus revere him as now. But he was even then hailed as the supporter of the earth and the sky, a close friend of Indra's and a resident of the highest abode (Paramam Padam) where all souls go when they escape from the cycle of rebirth. He was often also equated with light, Surya, and referred to as Suryanarayana, a name that persists to this day.
- **Rudra** – Rudra 'the Roarer', who shared many attributes – like wild matted hair, for instance – with the later Hindu god we know as Shiva, was the archer god of the storm and the hunt, his shining arrows streaking across the sky as lightning. Again, there are only five sukta addressed to him, which tells us he was a relatively minor Vedic god.

In the Vedas, Rudra is referred to both as Ghora, the terrifying one, and Aghora, the peaceful one, but his general demeanour seems to have been more terror-inducing than reassuring. The fact that Hindus use the names Rudra (fierce) and Shiva (kind) interchangeably for him even today tells us that he is still believed to have both those aspects to his personality. Rudra, who had a whole arsenal of pills and potions at his command, was also revered as Vaidyanatha, the physician of physicians.

Now here's the cool part about Rudra – he also shared some attributes with a god of the even more ancient Harappan people! Archaeologists have named his Harappan equivalent Pashupati, Lord of the Beasts, because of the way he was depicted by them. Could that indicate that the Arya were really the later Harappans, and therefore natives, not foreigners?

(Want to know a little more about the Harappans and the mysterious

Pashupati? Check out ‘Pashupati’s People’ on page 54.)

- **Saraswati** – The goddess of knowledge that Hindus revere as Saraswati today was not the Saraswati of the Vedic Arya. To them, she was simply the ‘greatest of rivers’. Scholars believe that the earliest parts of the Rig Veda must have been composed when the Arya lived on her banks in the north-west of India, around 1500 BCE. They have also been puzzling over the identity of the river that the Arya referred to as Saraswati. Whichever it was, Hindus consider the Saraswati, along with the Ganga and Yamuna, as one of their three most sacred rivers, and believe that she merges with the other two at the Triveni Sangam (the holy spot where three rivers meet) at Prayag in Prayagraj (earlier Allahabad) in Uttar Pradesh.
- **Yama** – Ever wondered how Yama got to be the Hindu god of death? Well, according to the Rig Veda, he won the position simply because he was the very first human to die and find his way to heavenly realms! As the ruler of the departed, it was his job to come down to earth on his buffalo, collect souls released from dying bodies and offer them safe passage to his kingdom.

Phew. All done. And if you thought that was a long list of gods and goddesses, think about the number of Hindu gods there are now! How come? Well, the Arya made it a habit to keep adding all the local gods and goddesses to the large bunch they already had. Luckily, that divine bunch was accommodating enough, scooting over cheerfully to make place for all the new ones that arrived.

The thing to remember, however, is that while the Arya worshipped all these different deities, they believed that all of them were only manifestations of one Supreme Being, the formless, nameless one they called Ishvara. In the Upanishads, which were composed 1,000 years after the Vedas, this Supreme Being came to be called Brahman.

One destination, many possible routes – Hinduism sounds like a Google map, wot?



PASHUPATI'S PEOPLE

A short intro to the original champions of 'Jahan Soch, Wahan Shauchalay'

Some 5,000 years ago, i.e., 1,500 years before our Veda-chanting Arya made their appearance on the Indian stage and around the same time that the world's first cities were coming up on the banks of the river Nile in Egypt, and the rivers Euphrates and Tigris in Mesopotamia (today's Iraq), a very advanced civilization – we refer to it today as the Harappan Civilization – was flourishing on the banks of our own Sindhu (Indus) and Saraswati rivers.

The people of this civilization were best known for their brilliant urban planning. Over a vast area stretching from Shortugai on Afghanistan's Russian border to Daimabad in Maharashtra and from Sutkagen Dor on the Makran coast near Iran to Alamgirpur near Delhi, they built great cities with straight roads, granaries, working sewerage systems, and houses with built-in bathrooms and flushes! They traded with Mesopotamia and Egypt both via land and sea routes, grew crops like barley and wheat, and left behind pottery, beads, terracotta toys, jewellery, beautifully cast figurines in bronze and mysterious seals for us to find and puzzle over thousands of years later. They even left behind a script, which we haven't been able to decipher yet. In fact, we don't even know what their land was called – we think it was called Meluhha because the Mesopotamians left records of trading with a country called Meluhha in the east.



The statue of the 'priest king' from Mohenjo-Daro

No weapons or royal regalia have been found at Harappan sites yet, which leads us to guess that they were not aggressive conquerors led by kings but a peaceful agricultural society most likely ruled by priests (experts have deduced this based on the bust of a bearded man in a robe and a diadem found during early excavations – they believe this man was a person of authority, most likely a priest).



The 'Pashupati' seal

And when we talk priests, can the gods be far behind? Again, we have no idea of Harappan gods, but there is one fascinating seal we have found that has had everyone excited for the longest time. The seal is only about an inch square, and damaged to boot, but if you squint hard at it, you can see that it shows a seated male figure. Experts believe that figure could represent a Harappan god who, with the addition of a few tweaks and changes, is still

being worshipped as a major Hindu god today!

They came to that conclusion through the kind of deductive process we all follow when faced with a puzzle – we overlap the knowledge we have with what is before us, and make some inspired guesses. The process must have gone somewhat like this:

- **Observation:** The figure on the Harappan seal is sitting cross-legged.

Deduction: Ah! That looks like the lotus pose in yoga, the ‘padmasana’, so maybe this is a yoga teacher of some kind, or even, dare I say it, a god of yoga?

- **Observation:** He has three faces, one facing forward and two in profile.

Deduction: Ah! Many Hindu gods are shown with more than one head, so this guy is definitely looking more like a god now.

- **Observation:** He is wearing some kind of headgear, with two beautifully curving horns.

Deduction: Ah! Many Hindu gods are associated with animals – the horns could mean this god is associated with a bull.

- **Observation:** The horns enclose what looks like a fountain or a plant.

Deduction: Hang on a minute! When the fountain and the horns are taken together, they look like a... trident! Many Hindu gods are associated with their own special weapon. Omg, I think I know which Hindu god this is!

- **Observation:** Around him are carved several animals – a tiger, an elephant, a rhino, a buffalo and a deer.

Deduction: Ah! This could mean that this figure was revered as the ‘Lord of All Creatures’. Omg, omg, another name of the Hindu god I was thinking of before is Pashupati, which means ‘Lord of All Creatures’. I know who this is, it has to be him – this is an ancient, ancient version of... you guessed it – Shiva!

And that was how the figure on the broken seal got his name – Pashupati!

Of course we will never know for sure (or at least until we decipher the Harappan script, and maybe not even then) whether that figure really represents a Harappan god, and if that god was really a predecessor of the Shiva we are familiar with today.

In fact, so far, we don't even know what happened to our great city-building ancestors and why they disappeared so mysteriously around 3,800 years ago. One popular theory is that a great drought forced the Harappans to move east and south on the subcontinent, but it doesn't explain why they did not build up a grander civilization somewhere else, and how their advanced knowledge of urban design and planning died out entirely.

Hmm. Maybe there is a totally different explanation. Maybe the Harappans were beamed up en masse into passing alien spaceships. Maybe, with the blessings of Pashupati, they colonized an entirely new planet. Maybe, when they pass overhead in the dark of a winter night, they shake their heads sadly at how we are destroying ours. Maybe.

The jury is still out on this one. What is *your* theory?



A-ONE, A-TWO, A-ONE, TWO, THREE, FOUR!

The symbiotic tale of four Vedas and a yagna



Now that we are somewhat familiar with the history of the Vedas, we can get to the important matter of what the Arya used them for.

As you know by now, the religion of the Arya primarily centred around the ritual sacrifice they called yagna. But what was the yagna ‘concept’ really about?

Well, a yagna was actually a mega-feast hosted by humans for the gods! Most of the hymns of the Vedas were essentially invitations to these VIPs, laced with praise and blandishments, and loaded with descriptions of all the delicious food on offer, to tempt the gods into RSVP-ing with an enthusiastic ‘Wouldn’t miss it for the world!’ Of course, the inviting had to be done just right, and the food prepared and served just so, or the gods would either not arrive or stomp out in a huff in the middle of the yagna, which would not do at all – a lot of devotion and effort and money would go down the drain then, the yajamana would make a zero return on investment in terms of boons received, and worse, incur a round of divine punishments to boot.

Why did the Arya throw such ginormous parties for their gods? Was it only because they feared their wrath? Not really. A yagna was performed for many reasons, chief among them being to show gratitude to the gods for always being there – as sunlight, rain, wind, fertile earth, rushing rivers and overall protectors – and to return that favour in some small measure, so that the sacred cycle of give-and-take between gods and humans was kept in motion. Yagnas were also the Arya way of nourishing their gods with food, drink and adoration, to ensure that they regained the strength and lustre they had lost combating river-blocking dragons, cow-concealing demons and other enemies of humankind – for if the gods were not nourished, who would stand in the way of the forces of destruction that constantly threatened the world? Equally importantly, yagnas were performed by the rich and powerful not just for their own benefit but for the noble cause of ‘loka kalyan’ – the

welfare of the world – because the Arya believed, as we still do, that it was unselfish acts like these that helped tot up brownie points in their karma accounts for their next life.

And that’s why it was so important to have the right priests in place, chanting the right hymns from the appropriate Vedas, and doing all the right things as far as the yagna prep, event flow and offerings went, to ensure a perfect yagna for the yajamana.

How did the hymns of the four Vedas fit into this picture? Did one priest know all of them by heart or did it take a whole battalion of them to pull off a successful yagna? Let’s take a little detour to examine the Vedas in a little more detail, shall we?

HOW WERE THE VEDAS BUILT? LAYER BY LAYER!

Each of the four Vedas, i.e., the Rig, the Yajur, the Sama and the Atharva, is organized into four sections – the Samhita, the Brahmana (say braah-mana), the Aranyaka (say aa-ranyaka) and the Upanishad.

THE SAMHITA

The **Samhita** part of each Veda is the oldest layer, and the simplest to explain. The Samhita, which simply means ‘collection’, is that part of the Vedas that is called ‘liturgy’ in English. Liturgy is the actual set of hymns that are chanted during the rituals of public worship in any religion (in Sanskrit*, the Vedic hymns are called mantras).

*All the Samhitas are in Vedic Sanskrit, which is an ancient form of the language that we know today as Sanskrit. It wasn’t until the 5th century BCE, when the great scholar Panini put down the rules of Sanskrit grammar, that Sanskrit became a ‘formal’ language that could be taught, written and spoken in exactly the same way by everyone. In the beginning, Sanskrit was written using a number of different

scripts derived from the Brahmi script used in Emperor Ashoka's time, but today its official script is Devanagari, the same 'washing-line' script we use to write Hindi.

THE BRAHMANA

Unfortunately, the Samhitas, like a lot of the archaic poetry you are forced to study in school and college today, were written in language that was often too obscure and difficult to understand. So an interpretation, which explained the significance and meaning of each mantra and ritual, apart from providing minute details on how each ritual was to be carried out, was later added on to each Veda. This layer is called the **Brahmana**. (Note: Different opinions as to the real meaning of the mantras ensured that there was often more than one Brahmana for a Samhita – we are not called the 'Argumentative Indians' for nothing!) Mercifully, the Brahmanas were written in straightforward prose.

THE ARANYAKA

As centuries went by, many deep thinkers among the later Arya found themselves questioning the mostly literal interpretations in the Brahmanas. They pondered questions like – 'Sure the poet says "Surya's chariot has one wheel and seven horses" here, but what did he or she really mean? Maybe the seven horses are actually the seven colours of the rainbow and the one wheel means they all combine to make one colour, the white of sunlight? Maybe the seven horses indicate the five senses, the mind and the intellect, and Surya is the one who controls all of them so that the one wheel of our awareness is not pulled in seven different directions at the same time?'

See how this sort of thing can be fun? And how you can go on endlessly? The cool part is that when wise, well-meaning people sit down to do this, they can come up with the kind of creative interpretations that truly expand our understanding. They can urge us to read between the lines, to not accept

things at face value, and seek the truth beyond what the eyes see and the ears hear.

The rishis who meditated in the deep dark of the jungles, passing their experiences and learnings along to students in their forest academies, were among the wisest, most free-thinking and most imaginative people of the Vedic Age. Their questions (including the ones they asked themselves) and their fresh, new interpretations of the hymns of the Samhitas, form the third layer of the Vedas – the **Aranyakas**. (Why ‘Aranyakas’? Well, in Sanskrit, ‘aranya’ means forest, and these thinkers usually lived in the forests. Ergo.)

THE UPANISHAD

The Aranyakas seem to flow naturally into the last section of the Vedas – i.e., the Vedanta or the **Upanishads** – because the latter are also deep and philosophical thoughts on life, the universe and everything. But the Upanishads also stand by themselves, because, unlike the Aranyakas, they do not refer to the Vedic rituals or the Samhita at all. It’s quite possible, therefore, that the Upanishads were composed independently, quite separate from the Vedas (after all, they were composed a millennium later!) and were then tacked on to the Vedas as their fourth and final layer because the thoughts in them seemed to progress directly from the Aranyakas. [In fact, the oldest and largest of the Upanishads, the Brihadaranyaka, literally means ‘The Giant (or Expanded) Aranyaka’.]

As you can see, the Samhitas are the ‘real’ Vedas – the other layers are only more and more advanced interpretations of them. Also, while the division between the Samhitas and the Brahmanas is quite clear, the lines between the other three sections are pretty fuzzy, with one merging merrily into the other*. There is also a clear division between the first two layers and the later two – the first two form the ‘doing’ or action part of the Veda –

hymns to be sung, rituals to be performed – while the last two are the ‘thinking’ or wisdom part – questions to ponder over, lessons to live by.

PS: Can you guess what the ‘action’ section and ‘thinking’ section are called in Sanskrit? Here’s a clue – the Sanskrit word for section is ‘kanda’ (say kaanda). Now think about what the Sanskrit words for action and wisdom are, and you will have your answer.

(Ans: Karma Kanda and Jnana Kanda)

Another bit of trivia before we go on - in the Bhagavad Gita, which carries the essence of all the wisdom of the Upanishads, Sanjaya, the narrator of the events of the war, tells the blind king Dhritarashtra that the side that will win the war will be the one that has action and wisdom (a metaphor for Arjuna and Krishna, respectively) on its side. This is true in life as well – there is no point in knowing what to do but not doing it, nor is there any point in doing things without knowing why. Because the Vedas contain both an action part and a wisdom part, they are, according to Hindus, the ‘complete’ texts.

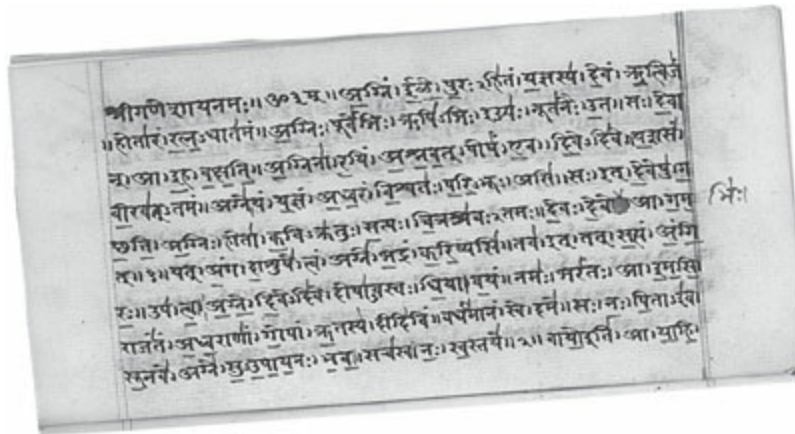
*OK, one important clarification here – it wasn’t the ‘composers’ of these four layers who decided which Aranyaka and Upanishad was part of which Veda, or even that the Aranyakas and Upanishads were layers of the Vedas at all. That was decided far more recently, once the texts – at least the ones that were remembered or whose manuscripts were found – were written down and collected, and scholars could study them as a whole. When an Upanishad was already part of the Brahmana or Aranyaka layer of a Veda, there was no debate; when it was a stand-alone Upanishad, however, decisions had to be taken on which Veda to attach it to. Scholars did not always agree on this, which is why there is no definitive list – an Upanishad may be associated with one Veda in one list, and with another in a different one.



HYMN AND HERB, SPELL AND SONG

Now, what are the Samhitas – the original, oldest parts of each of the four Vedas – about? (Longish textbookish detour alert!) While the Samhitas of the first three at least dabble in similar concerns – the gods, the yagna and a bit of philosophy – each is distinct and serves different purposes. The fourth Samhita, that of the Atharva Veda, is way off this grid, and is absorbed with everyday human concerns, which is perhaps why it is the most interesting of all.

The **Rig Veda Samhita** is the oldest and longest of all the Samhitas. Its name comes from the Sanskrit 'ric', which means 'praise' or 'light', so 'Rig Veda' translates to 'Hymns of Praise' or 'The Light of Knowledge' or 'The Knowledge of Exaltation' – something like that. The Rig comprises ten books, or Mandalas, containing 10,600 verses as part of 1,028 hymns dedicated to all the important Arya deities. (We are speaking here of the version of the Samhita that has survived. There were almost certainly other versions, with more or fewer hymns, but they have all disappeared). Mandalas 2–9, which are the oldest, are mostly hymns to the gods and goddesses. Mandalas 1 and 10 were composed much later, and while Mandala 1 has similar concerns as the older ones, Mandala 10 talks about things like the creation story – how the universe was born, how man was created, and so on – and the nature of God.



A page from a handwritten copy (early 19th century) of the Rig Veda

The **Sama Veda Samhita** is a subset of the Rig Veda Samhita, consisting of a selection of 1,875 of its verses (yup, no new material there). What makes this Samhita special, though, is that these 1,875 verses are set to music, which explains how this particular Veda gets its name – ‘saaman’ is Sanskrit for ‘song’. It also explains why the Sama Veda Samhita is meant to be heard, not read. When they began to be written down, the verses were musically ‘notated’ too – in other words, the ‘tune’ to which the verses must be sung was clearly marked (similar to how a musical score is written down in western sheet music), which means that when we ‘sing’ verses from the Sama Veda, we are singing them in exactly the same tune as they were sung 3,000 years ago! In fact, all Indian classical music and dance traditions consider the melodies in the Sama Veda to be part of their original roots. But Sama Veda hymns are neither quite sung like songs nor chanted like the Rig Vedic mantras. They fall somewhere in between the two – a melodious chanting, shall we say? The melodies are believed to have existed before the Sama Veda itself, with words from the Rig Vedic hymns being fitted into those melodies as best they could.*

*Remember that bit from the 1965 film *The Sound of Music* where Maria teaches the von Trapp kids a melody – *Sol Do La Fa Mi Do Re / Sol Do La Ti Do Re Do* – and the youngest, Gretl, protests – ‘But they don’t mean anything!’? Remember how Maria answers, ‘So we put in words. One word for every note. Like this – When- you- know- the- notes- to- sing / You- can- sing- ’most- a-ny-thing!’? The Sama Veda ‘songs’ are believed to have been constructed in exactly the same way.

Unlike the Samhitas of the Rig Veda and the Sama Veda, the **Yajur Veda Samhita** is a mix of prose and verse. The verse part, while not identical to the Rig Veda verses, borrows liberally from them. The prose part, on the other hand, is original, and comprises the ‘formulae’ recited during a sacrifice as the offerings are being poured. In fact, the name of the Veda itself comes

from the Sanskrit ‘yajus’, which means sacrifice. (Yajus is also the root word of... yup, yagna!)

Now, even though the Vedas had stringent methods of oral transmission, some variations are bound to creep in over three millennia. The story goes that Veda Vyasa, the compiler and editor of the Vedas, taught the Yajur Veda to his student Vaishampayana, who in turn taught it to twenty-seven of his students, who taught it onwards in their own shakhas or schools. Over time, we ended up with two variants of the Yajur Veda Samhita – the so-called Shukla (Sanskrit for ‘white’ or ‘bright’) Yajur Veda, and the Krishna (‘black’ or ‘dark’) Yajur Veda, considered ‘dark’ because it was not organized as meticulously as the Shukla, and was therefore confusing. (Hey, Arya! Your colour biases are showing!)

Most scholars believe that the **Atharva Veda Samhita** is not directly connected with the other three, because this one has less to do with liturgy and gods and philosophical ruminations, and more with the everyday fears and hopes and troubles of common people. The Atharva Veda’s name origin is different from the rest of the Vedas too – it is named after the sage Atharvan, who – interesting sidelight alert! – is believed to be the man who discovered how to make fire by rubbing a pair of sticks together!

This fourth Samhita is a motley mix of many unusual and somewhat bizarre things – spells to ward off nightmares and disease, prayers to individual herbs to do their job as healers, mantras to chant while a broken bone is being set, praise for the motherland and the mother tongue, and even incantations to wake a dead person so that he can go and meet his ‘deader’ ancestors. True story.

In fact, there are so many prayers to plants and herbs, and the verses display such a vast knowledge of the healing properties of each, that the Atharva Veda Samhita is believed to be the inspiration behind the Indian

system of medicine, Ayurveda! Both the great ancient Indian healer Charaka, who left us the Charaka Samhita, a fat compendium on Ayurveda, and the ancient Indian doctor and surgeon, Sushruta, who wrote the Sushruta Samhita, a medical manual listing 1,120 illnesses and their treatment, along with surgical procedures that include tooth extraction, fracture management and cataract surgery, acknowledge the Atharva Veda Samhita as one of their main inspirations. Cool, hunh?

Now, armed with all this information about the Vedas, back to the main pastime of rich and powerful Arya – the yagna!

BACK TO THE YAGNA

By the time some 800 years had passed since the earliest bits of the Rig Veda were composed, yagnas were really trending in Aryavarta. There were daily fire yagnas at home and outside, fortnightly yagnas to commemorate the new moon (and the full moon), four-monthly yagnas to celebrate the start of each new season, yagnas to celebrate a good harvest or pray for rain after a bad one, and yagnas for more ‘special occasions’ than anyone could keep count of – birth, marriage, death, and many more. Then there were the mega one-off yagnas – performed by a king to celebrate a famous victory, or to ask for blessings before going to war; the list was never-ending. And while they were seriously expensive affairs for the yajamana, they certainly kept those knowledgeable in the Vedas, the brahmins, very happy indeed – after all, a yagna could not happen without Vedic hymns.

Now, each Veda had its own set of specialists, so there were four sets of brahmins required at each yagna. One set, called the ‘hotri’, were the Rig Veda experts – they chanted mantras from the Rig Veda Samhita. The ‘udgatri’ formed the choir, providing the melodious background score to the yagna via the hymns of the Sama Veda. Yet another set of specialists, the

‘adhvaryu’, had aced their Yajur Veda exams and did the real work of clearing and preparing the sacrificial ground, building the fire pits, ritually slaughtering the sacrificial animals and cooking them in the prescribed way, and pouring the offerings into the sacred fire, all the while also chanting the formulae for each act. Phew.

And presiding over all of them, and the yagna itself, was the High Priest and Master of the Yagna – the learned Brahmana (say braah-mana)*. The Brahmana sat silent and remote to the right of the yajamana** for the entire duration of the yagna, his keen eyes observing everything, missing nothing. It was his job to see that the hotri, the udgatri and the adhvaryu did their jobs perfectly, without taking shortcuts that would jeopardize the divine feast. The High Priest was also adept at the Atharva Veda. When and if things went wrong with the yagna, the Brahmana went into damage-control mode, chanting the right spells and charms from the fourth Veda to reverse curses, neutralize the bad effects of the wrong moves, and keep disaster, drought and disease from raining down on the yajamana’s head, and on his people’s.

*Brahmana (Chief Priest at the yagna) is different from Brahman (Supreme Soul, Universal Energy) is different from Brahma (Hindu god) is different from brahmin (varna, occupation, caste) is different from the Brahmanas (the second layer of the Vedas). Phewwww.

**In several yagnas, it was mandatory for the wife of the yajamana to participate as co-host. She sat on his left.

You can see why this was a great gig for the priests – at the end of each yagna, the yajamana rewarded each of them with generous amounts of dakshina, or fees, not only to express his gratitude for a job well done but also to buy himself insurance from their curses and ill-will. Win-win all around!

Filed away all that macro info about the Vedas? Super. On to the micro now, in the next chapter!

THE ORIGINAL ‘BEAT POETS’

A brief introduction to the many rhythms of the Vedas

How do you classify a certain grouping of words as verse while another is classified as prose? In English poetry, verse usually involves a rhyme scheme of some kind. In a four-line verse, for example, line 2 may rhyme with line 4 (as in the nursery rhyme ‘Mary had a little lamb’). Or it may be that lines 1 and 2 rhyme with each other, while lines 3 and 4 do the same (as in ‘Twinkle, twinkle, little star’). But you knew that already.

What you may not have realized is that, to give even the simplest verse its lovely rhythmic cadence, the *number of syllables* per line of the verse also has to follow a plan. In ‘Mary had a little lamb’, for instance, the number of syllables in the first, second, third and fourth lines is a nice and regular 7-6-7-6. In ‘Twinkle, twinkle, little star’, it is 7-7-7-7. This rhythmic structure is called the ‘metre’ of the verse.

If you think about any Sanskrit shlokas that you know or have heard, you will notice that the lines very rarely rhyme with each other. And yet, there is a lovely beat to all shlokas when they are recited or sung, because keeping to a particular metre, or ‘chanda’ (say chhan-da), was considered sacred in Vedic poetry.

There are seven different chandas, together called the ‘seven mouths of Brihaspati’, used in Vedic poetry. What are their names, and how do they work? Let’s find out.

1. **The Gayatri** – The famous Gayatri Mantra from the Rig Veda is actually a salutation to the sun, or Savitr. It is called the Gayatri Mantra because it is composed in the Gayatri metre, the shortest and the most sacred of all the Vedic metres! A verse written in this metre has 3 ‘syllable collections’ (also called ‘foot’ in English or ‘paada’ in Sanskrit) of 8 syllables each,

adding up to 24 syllables in all. Count the syllables in the Gayatri Mantra below and see for yourself! (FYI, each line is a paada.)

Tat Savitur varenyam

Bhargo devasya dhimahi

Dhiyo yo nah prachodayat

We meditate

On the effulgent glory of that Divine Light, Savitr –

May He illuminate our understanding.

Did you notice that the first line of the Gayatri mantra has only seven syllables? No one is sure why that is so; perhaps it is because the words were pronounced a little differently in Vedic times. When it is recited today, to keep the sanctity of the Gayatri metre, some people split the word and say ‘varen-iyam’.

2. **The Ushni** – With two paadas of 8 syllables and one of 12, the Ushni has exactly four syllables more than the sacred Gayatri.
3. **The Anushtubh** – The favourite metre of the post-Vedic poets, the Anushtubh is used extensively in the verses of the Rig Veda, the Mahabharata, the Ramayana and the Bhagavad Gita, apart from the Puranas and ancient scientific works in Sanskrit. This famous prayer to Ganesha is composed in the Anushtubh metre. Can you calculate the number of paadas, the number of syllables per paada, and the total number of syllables of this metre?



*Vakratunda mahakaya
Surya koti samaprabha
Nirvighnam kurume deva
Sarvakaryeshu sarvada*

*O big-bodied Lord of the twisted trunk,
Who shines with the radiance of a million suns;
Remove all obstacles from our paths
And bless all our endeavours, always.*

Ans: 4 paadas of 8 syllables each; 32 syllables in all.

4. **The Brihati** – Like the Anushtubh, this one also has 4 paadas, except, in the Brihati's case, the third paada has 12 syllables instead of 8.
5. **The Pankti** – This chanda has 5 paadas, each with 8 syllables, making 40 syllables in all.

Let's pause here for a moment. Have you noticed a pattern, a progression, in the five chandas we've looked at so far? If yes, you will

know, without reading further, exactly how many syllables the next chanda, the Trishtubh, should have. Make your guess now, and then read on to check if you got it right!

6. **The Trishtubh** – The second most favourite metre of the Rig Vedic poets after the Gayatri, the Trishtubh is used extensively in ancient Sanskrit drama, epic poetry and literature. It is also used in the Bhagavad Gita to great dramatic effect in Chapter 11. Here's how it's done.

In chapters 1 through 10 of the Gita, sitting in the palace at Hastinapura, the royal charioteer Sanjaya describes the scenes from the epic battle about to begin at Kurukshetra to the blind king Dhritarashtra, in verse that uses a calm and measured Anushtubh metre. By chapter 10, the rhythm has lodged itself in the reader or listener's mind, and he is unconsciously keeping beat.

In Chapter 11, when in response to Arjuna's request, Krishna reveals his terrifying Vishwaroopa form to him, the metre of the verse suddenly changes to Trishtubh as Arjuna (and Sanjaya) become incoherent with bliss and wonder and fear at the vision of this cosmic Krishna. The change of beat catches the listener unawares, shakes him out of his complacency, and delivers the kind of mega-goosebumps that that mega-moment deserves. Clever technique, huh?

But how many syllables and how many paadas in the Trishtubh? Take a look at Verse 15 from Chapter 11 of the Bhagavad Gita, the point at which Anushtubh turns to Trishtubh, and find out for yourself!

Pashyaami devaans tava deva dehe

Sarvaans tathaa bhoota-vishesha-sanghaan

Brahmaanam eesham kamalaasana-stham

Risheensh cha sarvaan uragaansh cha divyaan

And Arjuna said: I see all the gods of all the worlds in you, my Lord! I see hosts of divine beings, Brahma seated on his lotus, Shiva, the sages, and all the celestial serpents!

Ans: 4 paadas of 11 syllables; 44 syllables in all.

7. The Jagati – The longest metre among the ancient ones, the Jagati is used a lot in post-Vedic Sanskrit literature. The shloka below is the third shloka from the Bhagavata Purana (*for more info on the Bhagavata, see ‘The Fifth Veda’ on the next page*). It exhorts poets and romantics, sinners and liberated souls, to read the Bhagavatam so that their souls may be liberated. As before, do a quick (or s-l-o-w) reading of the shloka and see if you can tell how many paadas, how many syllables per paada and how many syllables in all the Jagati has!

*Nigama kalpataror galitam phalam
Shuka mukhaat amritadrava samyutam
Pibata bhaagavatam rasam aalayam
Muhur aho rasikaa bhuvi bhaavukaah*

O seekers, connoisseurs, and all ye liberated souls, drink deep of the nectar of the Bhagavatam, which falls from the lips of the sage Shuka; partake constantly of this life-giving draught of the fruit borne on the giving tree of knowledge that is the Veda.

Ans: 4 paadas, 12 syllables per paada, 48 syllables in all. Did you notice how the number of syllables went up by 4 in each chanda, until 24 syllables in the Gayatri became 48 in the Jagati?

THE FIFTH VEDA

FYI: A clear winner hasn't emerged, and nominations are still being accepted

Suuuur-prise! There aren't just four, but five Vedas!

Where did a Fifth Veda, often called the Panchama Veda, spring from? The earliest reference to it is in the Sama Veda, in which a work simply called the 'Itihasapurana' is singled out as the Fifth Veda.

But 'itihasapurana', as we understand it today, is a generic term for works composed by humans that became elevated over the centuries to the status of sacred scriptures. The Mahabharata and the Ramayana are part of what Hindus call Itihasa (*see page 28*), and there are eighteen major and eighteen minor works that are considered to be Puranas or sacred stories. Which among these is the Panchama Veda, then? Who knows? Thanks a lot, ancient rishis, for not being more specific!

There are other contenders to Fifth Veda status as well! One thing common to all of them is that, unlike the four original Vedas, they were egalitarian – Fifth Veda texts were accessible to people of all castes (including shudras and women – hurrah!). Another is that they all aimed to teach the lessons of the Vedas using completely different approaches – storytelling, dance, theatre – not only in Sanskrit but also in the language of the common people, so that the lessons reached as far and wide and deep as possible. Here are some of the top contenders.

The Mahabharata – The No. 1 contender. After all, it is considered Itihasa, it scores in terms of sheer size over the other epic Itihasa, the Ramayana and, according to its fans, it contains every human emotion, foible, drama, conflict and resolution between its covers. In that sense, it is a great and down-to-earth teacher of the very same lessons that are couched in such esoteric

language and philosophy in the other four Vedas. Plus, it is believed to have been composed by Vyasa, the same sage who compiled the other four Vedas.



The Bhagavata Purana – One of the eighteen major Puranas, this one is a complete eulogy to Krishna and Krishna-bhakti (devotion to Krishna). Contrary to the idea that rigid worship to the accompaniment of mantras chanted by the upper-caste guardians of the Vedas was the only way to God, this Purana declares that simple, honest love for Krishna can get you to the exact same place. Most of the popular stories about Krishna’s birth and childhood that you may know are from this Purana, which is mainly narrated by Shuka, the son of Vyasa (he’s everywhere, this sage!). Composed around the 8th century CE (quite recently in the Veda calendar, that is), the Bhagavata was the first Purana to be translated into a European language – a French translation of a Tamil translation of the text came out in 1788.



The Natya Shastra – An ancient treatise on theatre, drama, dance and music, the Natya Shastra, believed to have been composed by the sage Bharata, is the root text for all Indian classical dance and theatre forms. (The name of one of our main classical dance forms, Bharatanatyam, comes from this sage’s name.)



In the Natya Shastra, the arts were seen as a medium through which to tell the stories of the gods and the epics to common people, so that they learnt, just as well as the scholars, how to lead a good and virtuous life. As for the artiste, it was his or her responsibility to be the bridge between the humans and the gods. To this day, all genres of Indian classical music and dance tell the same sacred stories and follow the same philosophy. If, at the end of a particularly accomplished Indian dance or music performance, you feel a rush of emotions jostling within you – joy, sadness, wonder, heroism, peace, and above all, a sense of having been transported to other realms – it didn't happen by chance, and it didn't happen only to you; it was exactly what the performer was aiming for! Now you know.

The Ramcharitmanas – Often referred to as the 'Hindi Veda', the story of the Ramayana as retold by the 17th century Awadhi poet Tulsidas is considered by its fans in northern India to have even more authority than the four ancient Vedas, and to be the perfect scripture for the modern world.

The Divya Prabandham and the Tevaram – Down south, Tamil votes for what constitutes the Fifth Veda are divided between the Divya Prabandham, a collection of verses extolling the greatness of Vishnu and his avatar Krishna, composed by the twelve Tamil saints called the Alvars; and the Tevaram, a collection of devotional verses dedicated to Shiva, composed by three of the sixty-three Shiva-worshipping poet-saints called the Nayanars.

Time to vote for your pick now! If you want to exercise the NOTA (none of the above) option because you want to nominate a different text entirely, that's fine too. This is a land of a billion opinions. Another one cannot hurt.

AWESOME THREESOME

Here come the top three Vedic yagnas!

The Ashwamedha – The best known of the three, the Ashwamedha featured an ashwa, or horse, as the medha, or offering, and was meant to establish a king as the undisputed ruler of his empire.

Only a powerful king could perform the long-running (minimum duration: one year!) Ashwamedha yagna, not only because it was expensive but also because it involved taking on several hostile armies during the period. Here's how it worked: First, the horse, usually a young and healthy stallion, was ritually purified and sent off without a rider or reins in the north-easterly direction. Along with the horse went a hundred soldiers and officers handpicked by the king.

As the horse roamed freely through the kingdom, and often beyond it, back home, the king and his priests kept the yagna fires burning, making offerings each day to the gods. Whenever anyone – a neighbouring king, a rebellious vassal, an ambitious young warrior – challenged the horse, either by not allowing it to pass, or by stealing or capturing it, he would have to go to war with the king's soldiers. Letting the horse pass unchallenged meant accepting the king as your overlord.



At the end of the year, if the stallion returned unchallenged, the king would declare himself supreme ruler of all the lands his horse had passed through. His queens would then beg the horse's forgiveness (because he was about to be sacrificed – sad but true). In the grand culmination of the yagna, the ashwa would become the medha for the gods.

In the Ramayana, years after he had sent Sita away to the forest, Rama performed the Ashwamedha Yagna. Since the yagna required the queen to be present, and since Rama had never stopped thinking of her as his beloved, his wife and his queen, he got a statue of her cast in gold and had it stand in for her. The consecrated horse was set free to roam where it willed, and no one dared to stop it. Until two young challengers at the forest hermitage of sage Valmiki not only captured the horse but also took on Rama's soldiers with such great skill and valour, defeating all of Rama's brothers one by one, that Rama himself was forced to finally intervene.

Can you recall the young challengers' names, and their identities?

Ans: The twins Lava and Kusha, who were Rama and Sita's sons.

The Rajasuya – This was an elaborate yagna performed, once again, to establish that a king (let's call him King X) was indeed the single and unchallenged big boss of his kingdom. To kick off proceedings, invitations to the Rajasuya Yagna were sent out to a whole lot of kings, princes and chieftains, both inside and outside the kingdom. If a king accepted the

invitation and attended the yagna, it meant that he had accepted King X as his ruler and would henceforth be loyal to him.



As long as the yagna fire burned, King X was treated not like a king but a demigod. There were various fun activities that he was involved in too – like a chariot drive-by, a display of his (hopefully decent) archery skills, a cattle raid (which tested his skill and strategy at stealing other people's cows) and a game of dice.

In the Mahabharata, after Yudhishtira was crowned king at his glittering new capital city, Indraprastha, he performed the Rajasuya Yagna. Hundreds of kings from all over attended, accepting him as their overlord. The Kauravas attended not as guests, but as the Pandavas' fellow-hosts, while Krishna was given the status of Most Honoured Guest. This made another guest, the king of Chedi, furious. This king had hated Krishna ever since the latter had carried away Rukmini, who had been betrothed to him (not Krishna's fault, really, Rukmini had begged him to carry her away). He began to insult Krishna publicly and viciously, and got his head taken off with Krishna's chakra for his pains. What was this king's name? (Ans: Shishupala.)



The Soma – Unlike the other two yagnas, the Soma Yagna was nobler, meant for the welfare of humanity. There was no horse involved, but there was, expectedly, a tonne of soma. The soma offered in such copious quantities was believed to strengthen and rejuvenate the gods and put them in a good mood, and the yagna itself was meant to cleanse the air of toxins and pollutants. Whichever way you looked at it, therefore, health, happiness and prosperity for all was guaranteed.

While no one has performed the Ashwamedha or Rajasuya yagnas in a long, long time, the Soma Yagna continues to be performed in India. According to Wikipedia, the most recent large-scale Soma Yagna was performed in Gujarat as recently as 2017!



LESSONS FROM THE VEDAS

**RITUALS ARE IMPORTANT. THE YAGNA
IS IMPORTANT. IGNORE THEM AT
YOUR PERIL.**

When the title is so dire, subtitles are superfluous

Yeah, yeah, we know. The very word ‘ritual’ sounds unfashionably old, smells of mothballs, feels like sweat and uncomfortable clothes and mumbling around a fire, and smacks of blind faith. Rituals are certainly not the kind of thing a modern and secular young person might want to associate himself or herself with.

But what is a ritual, anyway? The dictionary defines it as ‘a religious or solemn ceremony consisting of a series of actions performed according to a

prescribed order.’ Which is exactly what the Vedic rituals were, and exactly the kind of ritual you were thinking about. But here’s another definition from the same dictionary – ‘a series of actions or type of behaviour regularly and invariably followed by someone.’ These were the kinds of rituals recommended by the Upanishads – rituals like reflecting on things before arriving at a decision, for instance, questioning everything, looking beyond the differences on the outside to the sameness on the inside. But they recommended that you perform these rituals religiously, i.e., with the kind of rigour and fervour that is normally associated with religion. Because rituals can be important!



All of us have several rituals that we follow as individuals. Brushing our teeth first thing in the morning. Going out for lunch and a movie with friends on the last day of the exams. Wearing a particular T-shirt while watching a match because that’s what we wore the last time our team won. Not doing our homework until the morning of the day when it is due. You get the drift.

Families have rituals too – the long visit to the grandparents in the summer vacations, the annual Diwali party, Wednesday night FaceTime with a sibling who is away at college, and so on. Why, even countries have rituals – the hoisting of the national flag on Independence Day, for instance.

Do you consider these kinds of rituals important? Of course you do! Why? Is it simply that, because they are so predictable and repetitive, you derive a certain comfort from performing rituals, a feeling that no matter how

chaotic the world around you is, you can always depend on this constant? Is it because they make you feel less alone, and part of something bigger than yourself – a family, a community, a country? Is it because they force you to press the pause button on life, no matter how awful (or fabulous!) it seems at that moment, to do something that you have decided is non-negotiable – taking your dog for a walk, giving your granddad his medicine, going out to play?

It is for the very same reasons that religious rituals are important to the people who follow them.

But there are even more important, if less obvious, benefits of following rituals. The act of doing something over and over again without questioning it is the necessary first step towards building willpower, focus and discipline, all of which are among the toughest qualities to cultivate, as also among the most rewarding. A disciplined, focused person who can say ‘No’ to distractions and temptations with conviction is a person who is more likely to be successful in whatever his or her aim is.

Sure, rituals can often seem utterly mindless, even pointless, especially as your body and mind begin to do them on auto-pilot, whether it is chanting mantras or reciting the 12-19 times tables each morning or going for swimming coaching five times a week. But without having gone through these rituals, without knowing whether they work or not for you and in what ways, you have no way of progressing, of getting beyond them. How can you be sure that swimming is not for you unless you have committed to the coaching for a decent period of time? How do you know that mugging your tables is no use until you’ve felt the high of finishing your maths exam fifteen minutes earlier than everyone else?



See? Even rituals that seem mindless can be powerful. And it is precisely because rituals can be so potent that it is important to pick the right ones. After all, any ritual eventually becomes a habit, and bad habits are horrendously difficult to break.

As an exercise, why not sit down by yourself tonight and make a list of your daily ‘rituals’. Make sure not to leave out even those that you perform only in your head, like that little ritual where you tell yourself that you hate a particular classmate, or that you will never, ever be good at studies. When you’re done, ask yourself two questions about each one – 1. ‘Is this ritual ethical?’ (i.e., Am I sure it is not hurting anyone, including me? Am I sure it is fair to everyone involved?) and (2) ‘Does this ritual benefit anyone?’ If your answer to both questions is yes, the ritual, however annoying, is worth doing. If not, either let the ritual go or re-examine it to see how it can be changed for the better.

The sages of the Upanishads, who called out some of the Vedic rituals and exhorted people to see beyond their literal meanings, asked themselves the same questions. And when the answers came out as ‘no’, they were not afraid to drop those rituals, even though they realized that all change came at a price.

Neither should you. Be ruthless about nixing the rituals that aren’t healthy for you or the people around you, and replacing them with those that are. Of course there will be sacrifices involved – if you want to replace the ritual of waking up just in time for the school bus with the ritual of getting out of bed

forty-five minutes earlier, for instance, it's goodbye to that much zzz-time – but don't let that deter you.

Instead, look at every good ritual that you bring into your life as a sacrifice you offer to the universe. Every time you muster up the courage to call out your own toxic rituals, you sacrifice your old, not-so-great self and replace it with a new, better one.

That is the real yagna, the real sacrifice – and you will find that it is the one that counts.



A FEAST OF HYMNS

A selection of hymns from the granddaddy of the
Vedas



As you now know, there are thousands and thousands of suktas, or hymns, in the body of ancient sacred literature called the Vedas. And that's even if you consider just the first section of the Vedas, what we have earlier called the 'real' Vedas, i.e., the Samhitas. Since there is no way that the one small book you are holding just now can introduce you to all those suktas, here is a selection instead. Alternately lyrical, deeply philosophical and fabulously imaginative, all these suktas are taken from the Rig Veda Samhita, the oldest and largest of them all.

Now, what are the hymns of the Rig Veda about? Well, mostly about the Arya gods. More hymns in the Rig Veda – 289 to be precise – are addressed to Indra, the Lord of Heaven and the god of the rain and the storm, than to any other. There are also a substantial number addressed to Agni and Soma.

And while the hymns to their gods are beautiful, and full of wonder and praise, there are other hymns in the Rig that are far more interesting. Mostly, these hymns are from the Mandalas (sections) that bookend the text – Mandala 1 and Mandala 10 – which are believed to have been added later. There are stories there about how the universe was created, prayers to the horse that was sacrificed and eaten as part of the famous Ashwamedha yagna, funeral chants, powerful mantras, and spells against rivals, bad dreams and insomnia.

The nine hymns featured here are a mix of these, and have been very loosely translated - they are simply meant to give you a sense of what they are about. Do look elsewhere for a more faithful and complete translation.

THE VERY FIRST HYMN

Quite naturally, the first hymn of the first Mandala of what is probably the world's oldest religious text that is still in use is pretty special. Surprisingly, however, it is not dedicated to the Arya's chief god, Indra, but to Agni!

(Here's some trivia: so is the very last hymn of the last Mandala.) Agni is also the first word of the first hymn, and thus the word that the Rig Veda opens with.

The Fire Hymn

Agni Sukta – 1.1*

O Agni, Lord of the Sacrifice, I pray to you!
You before whom the ancients bowed, the one we adore –
Summon the gods to our feast!
Beloved priest, who ensures the success of our sacrifice
And bestows prosperity and courage and heroic sons –
Bring the gods to our feast!

Radiant One, who are true and effulgent and glorious
To whom we bring our prayers, day after day –
Come to our feast!



Agni, the Lord of Fire

Come to us easily, lovingly, like a father comes to his son,
Come, bringing us joy; bless us so we may prosper –

Come!

*The key to the numbering of the hymns is straightforward enough. The first number tells you which Mandala the hymn is taken from, and the second, which particular hymn it is within that Mandala. Sometimes, you will find a third number – that indicates a particular verse in the hymn being referenced by the first two numbers. If you want to explore the original hymns in Sanskrit, you can find your way to them in translations quite easily using these numbers.

THE STORY OF HOW THE WORLD WAS BORN

- *These are my principles. If you don't like them, I have others.* – American comedian Groucho Marx
- *This is my creation myth. If you don't like it, I have others.* – The composers of the Rig Veda

Every culture and every religion in the world has its own belief system about how the universe was born, and how man and his fellow creatures came to be. All creation myths are set in a vague time period in the past – usually referred to as ‘In the beginning’, or ‘At that time’ or simply, ‘Then’. They each carry in them certain truths and world views that are dear to the cultures that tell the stories, and the hopes and beliefs of the society that created them.

Creation myths also hugely impact and influence the way people in those societies see themselves in relation to the universe. Understanding a culture's creation myths can help you understand why the people of that culture behave the way they do. Do people believe, for instance, that everything in our universe is a product of intelligent design, that it was the Great Designer in the sky who created it, or do they believe that the universe began with a Big Bang? Do they believe that humans are the most superior of all species, with a divine charter to rule the world, or do they see all the world's creatures as interconnected and coming from one single source of primordial energy?

Do they see creation's timeline as a, well, line, with a beginning of the world and an end of the world, or do they see it as a cycle, in which everything that has been, will be again? You see how each of these beliefs can make people live their lives very differently? That's the power of creation myths!

Many early stories and myths travelled between places and people. This is one reason that many cultures have similar stories of creation, although each is tweaked a little to suit that particular culture. The most popular kinds of creation myths include ones in which:

- creation proceeds from the thought, word or dream of a divine being; He, She or It creates the universe *ex nihilo* (cool-sounding Latin phrase meaning 'out of nothing'), i.e., it is not fashioned out of some pre-existing raw material. Christian, Islamic and Jewish mythologies feature this kind of creation myth.
- creation results from the dismemberment (the action of cutting off the limbs of a person or animal; no, seriously!) of a primordial being. (Primordial sounds like a scary word but isn't. It just means something 'that existed at the beginning of time'.) Different parts of the being then become different parts of the cosmos. This kind of creation myth exists in Babylonian and Norse mythology, to name only two.
- creation happens by the hatching of the cosmic egg. This hugely popular creation story is found in Egyptian, Greek, Finnish, Polynesian, Chinese, Norse and many other mythologies.
- creation begins with God sending a bird or an amphibian, the earth diver, to plunge into the waters of the primordial ocean to bring up mud from the bottom, using which land is created. This myth is popular with the Native Americans, the Russian Tatars, the Siberian Yukaghirs, among others.

Needless to say, our Arya had their own creation myths as well. Their attitude to it, however, was – 'Why settle for one creation myth when you can

have several?’ The good thing about this kind of approach was that it kept the debate open – after all, new data could turn up any time that proved or disproved one or more of your myths! More seriously, though, this variety of creation myths can be seen as proof of the Arya’s great humility in the face of the awesome, wondrous universe that sustained and nourished them. These guys, like few others, were not too arrogant, too afraid or too embarrassed to shrug and say, ‘We think this may be the way it happened, or this, or this, but tbh, we don’t know.’

Here are four of the Arya creation myths, each presented as a hymn in the Rig Veda.

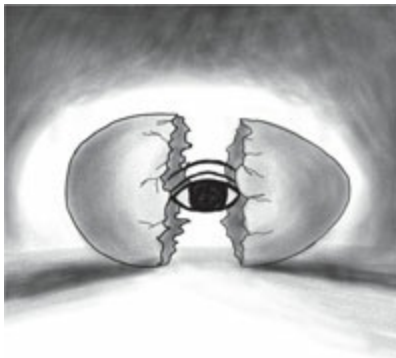
I.THE ‘THE-EGG-CAME-FIRST’ STORY A ‘cosmic egg’ creation myth

Probably the most popular one of all, this story is about a golden egg – ‘Hiranyagarbha’ in Sanskrit – that rose out of the deep dark of the all-encompassing floodwaters, containing the seed of everything in the universe. The heat of the fiery seed caused the egg to split – the top half of the shell became the sky, the bottom half the earth, and both were - and are - held in place by the Supreme Being, an all-pervading energy who himself became the atmosphere, the space between the earth and the sky.

Although most cultures believe in the concept of a primordial ocean, Hindus have a very particular understanding of ‘the waters’. They associate it with the all-consuming flood, MahaPralaya, which causes the dissolution of the universe at regular intervals (each interval is about 311 trillion years long, so you can rest easy!). Once the Great Dissolution has occurred, creation must begin all over again. It is in the depths of the MahaPralaya floodwaters that Hiranyagarbha is believed to arise.

Now let’s get to the hymn itself. Translating an ancient version of a

language can be very difficult, particularly because there is no way to tell what some words meant in the context of the civilization that produced it. One of the biggest debates among translators of this hymn is whether a question mark should be placed after the repeating line – ‘Who is the god we worship through our offerings’ – or not. It makes sense both ways, but the meaning is quite different in each case. If you read the line as a question, it sounds as if the Arya did not know who he was; if you read it as a statement, they sound almost smug in their certainty of his identity. At the end of the hymn, they give him a name – Prajapati, Lord of All Creatures.



Stanza 4 in the translation below says that the floodwaters and the egg came from Prajapati (by which you deduce that the egg was *outside* of Prajapati), but it also says that Prajapati was *inside* the egg! Eh?

Vedic hymns use such seeming contradictions a lot – it makes the hymns confounding if you try and make sense of them through logic. But that perhaps was exactly the message the ancient sages were trying to convey to us! God, Supreme Being, Energy, whatever you wish to call the life-force that sustains everything in the universe – is not easily definable. He cannot be described using our paltry words and metaphors, he lies beyond the grasp of our limited human intellect, and neither our senses nor our minds can ever hope to ‘see’ him in any form or fashion. It is only when we set aside our desire to fit him into our boxes of understanding – logic, rational thinking,

seeing, hearing, feeling – that we may be able to experience the wonder of it all.

And while you're wondering how to do that, let's salute the Vedic sages for not sitting on the fence at least on the prickly chicken-and-egg problem – they believed, clearly, that it was the egg that came first.

The Hymn of the Golden Embryo
Hiranyagarbha Sukta – 10.121

In the beginning
Before anything else was,
Was Hiranyagarbha, the Golden Egg,
The Lord of All Creation,
The one who held in place the earth and sky –

Who is the god we worship through our offerings.

He who bestows vigour and life,
He whose commands the gods obey,
King of the world, Lord of Death,
Ruler of everything that breathes and sleeps,
And everything that doesn't, and everything in between –

Who is the god we worship through our offerings.

He from whom snow-clad mountains
And rivers and rain and the sun have sprung,
Who filled the skies with vital air,
made firm the earth,
At whose sight both good and evil tremble in fear,

He who is the source of all our happiness –

Who is the god we worship through our offerings.

When the floodwaters came, they came from him,
Bearing the fiery seed, the golden egg, Hiranyagarbha;
Splitting the womb, he rose, life-breath of the gods,
Holding up the dome of the sky, filling the clouds with water,
Measuring space with the sun, propping the earth with his feet –

Who is the god we worship through our offerings.

Never may he harm us, he who is
Earth's begetter, Heaven's creator, guardian of the true law,
Ever may he grant our heart's desires!
O Prajapati, Lord of All Creatures, father-protector
There is no one but you –

Who is the god we worship through our offerings.

II. THE 'GOD-ONLY-KNOWS-OR-DOES-HE?' STORY

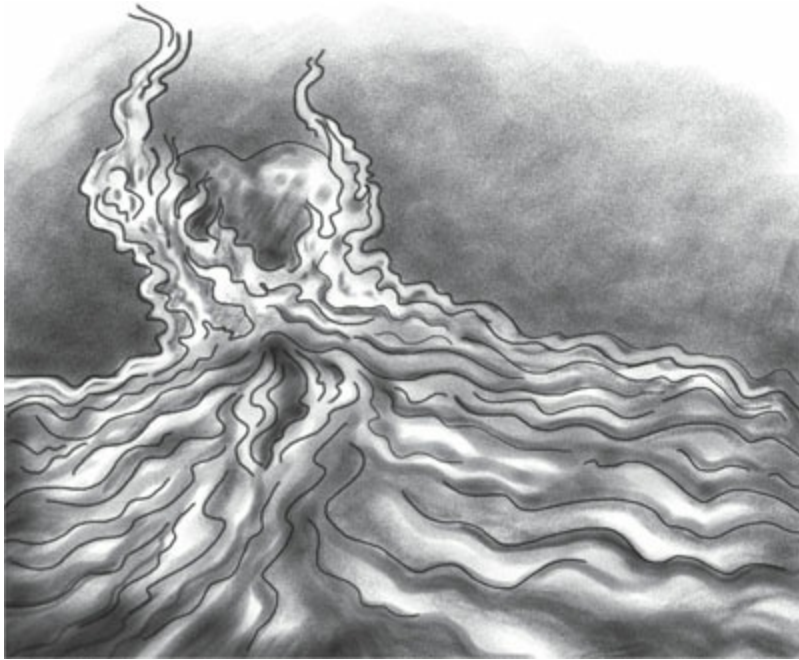
An 'ex-nihilo' creation myth

One of the hallmarks of Hindu scriptures is to question everything, but the Nasadiya Sukta seems to take that spirit of scepticism to, quite literally, a higher level. First, it proposes a creation myth in which creation happened because Paramatman, the Formless Energy, suddenly felt the desire to give Himself shape and form - to become both female and male, earth and sky, beast and bird - and see what that felt like. Then, it proceeds to doubt itself, wondering if anyone, even the gods, can ever really know the truth – after all, there was nothing around when creation began, not even the gods. But there

is an even more sacrilegious twist in the tail – read the hymn to find out what it is!

Again, there are confusing bits to this hymn. The very first line, which reads so much more mystically and alliteratively in Sanskrit – *Na asat* aasit na u sat aasit tadanim* – translates to ‘there was nothing that was non-existent, and nothing that was existent then’. ‘What!?’ you protest, tearing at your hair, ‘but it has to be one or the other, innit?’ Nope. Not where a Being that is ‘beyond dualities’ is concerned. It isn’t ‘one or the other’ with him. Nothing’s black or white. There are only endless shades of grey, infinite varieties of the (im)possible. Mental gymnastics, anyone?

*The name of the hymn, Nasadiya, comes from ‘Na asat’, its opening words.



The Hymn of That Which Is Not Non-Existent
Nasadiya Sukta – 10.129

Then

There was nothing that was non-existent, nor anything that was,

No air, no light, no heaven, no space,
No death, no life, no night, no day.
Darkness hidden in darkness -

Except for Something
That stirred in the still, by Its own will,
And then, was born,
Of Its own fire, Its own desire

Cleaving into
Above and below, giving and receiving, seed and womb,
It swelled the universe
Where chaos was rife, with power and life;

Who really knows where it all came from, this 'creation'?
Who can declare that this is how it was done?
Even the gods came later.

Only He knows, He who fashioned it all.
Or does He?

III. THE 'A-MASTER-CRAFTSMAN-BUILT-IT-BUT-WITH-WHAT- EXACTLY?' STORY

Another 'ex-nihilo' creation myth

If God is a reflection of ourselves, and vice versa, surely God built his house, the universe, as we build ours? Surely he would need to sculpt things and weld things and carve things? In this hymn, the Supreme Being is called Vishwakarma – literally, Maker of the Universe – and he is seen as sculptor and architect, blacksmith and carpenter.

With a pragmatic understanding that nothing can be created anew if what already exists isn't destroyed first, the hymn starts with a sacrifice where everything is consigned to the consuming fire by the High Priest, Vishwakarma. After completing the act of creation, the divine priest takes himself out of the picture. He, literally and metaphorically, fires himself, by turning himself into an offering, by becoming Agni.

But back to the creation part. If he offered everything, *everything*, as a sacrifice before he began, what in heaven's name did he build the world with? Read on to find out!

The Hymn of the Divine Architect Vishwakarma Sukta – 10.81

The first Priest, our Father, Vishwakarma,
Began creation with a sacrifice,
Offering everything there was, even himself, to Agni
The hotri became the sacrifice.

But if there was nothing left,
Where did he start his act of creation?
From what did he, of the all-seeing eye, sculpt the world?
Why did he create the earth
And the expanse of the sky?
Who knows the answers to these questions?

He who had eyes on all sides and mouths on all sides
And arms and feet on all sides –

Fanning the smithy flame with his arms –
How did he weld together earth and heaven?

From what wood of what tree, in truth,
Did he carve the worlds?

All ye thinking people, reflect on this mystery –
On what did he stand, Vishwakarma,
While he set the worlds up?

PS: This is the even more frustrating part of the Vedic hymns – you go to them looking for answers, and often come away with more questions than you had before! But through this no-doubt aggravating technique, they teach us great lessons – you can never know it all, the really important questions have no (simple) answers, the world is full of mystery and wonder, and, most importantly, it is often as much fun, if not more, to employ the fabulous gift of your intellect to fashion and ponder the questions, as it is to arrive at answers.

IV. THE ‘IT-WAS-THE-MAN-WHO-MADE-MAN’ STORY

A ‘dismemberment’ creation myth

One of the best-known hymns of the Rig Veda, particularly because of a highly controversial verse, the Purusha Sukta proposes, once again, that creation began with a sacrifice. Except, in this case, Purusha, the Cosmic Man, the Supreme Being, was himself the sacrificial animal. The gods were the priests at this primordial yagna, and as Purusha was dismembered, different parts of his body became different parts of the cosmos.

One of the messages of the hymn seems to be that there is always a sacrifice involved in achievement, whatever human goal you are pursuing – health (sacrifice the sugary drinks and chips!), wealth (sacrifice the extravagant spending), fame (sacrifice your right to a quiet and private life),

love (sacrifice your ego), doing the right thing (sacrifice your need to be popular), being at peace (sacrifice your desire to control everything).

However, the main message of the Purusha Sukta, its core lesson, is also the underlying philosophy of all Arya thought, all Hindu belief – everything, *everything* in the world, *comes from a common source*. We are all – birds and beasts and men and mountains and oceans and trees – connected; we carry inside us, despite all our apparent differences, a common divine spirit; we are all, in short, God. The philosophy also finds an echo in modern science – the Big Bang theory, the most accepted theory about how the universe was formed, posits, essentially, that the constantly expanding universe can be traced back to a single source, an unimaginably dense, unimaginably hot, unimaginably tiny point.

And the controversial verse? You can find it in stanza 5 of this translation, the part where it talks about which parts of the Purusha's body the different castes came from. A lot of people read this verse as a hierarchical arrangement of varna; since the brahmins came from the Purusha's mouth, they believe, they are naturally the highest caste (for good measure, the hymn also has Agni and Indra proceeding from the same body part), the kshatriyas are next, and so on, with the shudras being at the very bottom of the ladder. Through the centuries, the upper castes have used this verse as 'divine sanction' to persecute and exploit the lower castes.

While it is entirely possible that the sages of the Rig *intended* to place the brahmins higher than the shudras through this verse, there are a couple of other possibilities.

- Apart from in the Purusha Sukta, there is no mention of varnas in the Rig. This could indicate that varnas were not so clearly demarcated in the Rig Vedic society. Could it be then, that this one verse was slipped into the text at a later date, after the varnas had become hierarchical, to ensure that the

upper castes continued to maintain their position in society?

- Or was the verse intended to be a subversive one, designed to cleverly counter the existing hierarchy in society? Did a wise rishi slip it in, hoping that people would read it to mean that people of all varnas, equally, came from the same source?

Like the Rig Veda itself may ask, who knows the answers to these questions? All we can do when faced with such contradictions in interpretation, is to always, always, choose the kinder, fairer, more balanced one, over one that is less so. That is our responsibility as members of the human race, and our sacred duty.

But on to the hymn!

The Hymn of Man

Purusha Sukta – 10.90

Purusha, Giant Cosmic Man,

With his thousand heads, thousand eyes and thousand feet

Fills the earth and all the space around it –

But fits into a space just ten fingers tall.

That's not all.

All of earth's creatures, those that eat and those that do not

Are formed from only one quarter of him,

The other three quarters cover everything about and above them.

From him was born Virat, and from Virat was he –

They begat each other, see?

Then came the great sacrifice of the gods

With Purusha as the sacrificial beast;

They laid him on the kindling that was summer,

Poured on him ghee that was spring,
oil that was autumn –
And then some.

Out of the sacrifice came all Creation –
From the drippings were born beasts and birds,
From the offerings came the hymns and chants,
Of the Rig and the Yajur and the Sama –
Spectacle and drama!

Now the body of Purusha the Offering
Was divided; his mouth became the brahmin who chants,
His arms the kshatriya who wields sword and bow,
His thighs the vaishya who supports, his feet the shudra who serves –
All part of the same body, observe!

His mind? The moon! The sun? His eye!
His mouth? Indra-Agni. The wind? His breath!
His navel? Turned into space! His head? Became the sky!
His feet? Spread themselves out, became the earth –
This is the story of Man's birth.

PS: In stanza 1, the paradox is that while Purusha is large enough to permeate (be inside) and encompass (be outside) everything in all the worlds, he is also able to fit into a space that is only 'ten fingers tall'. That space is supposed to indicate the amount of space occupied by a man's soul. In stanza 2, the Virat referred to (also known as Viraj) is the female counterpart of Purusha. From Purusha was born Virat, and from Virat was born Purusha. This kind of thing would be a paradox in a culture that believes time is linear - first you are born, then you grow up, then you grow old, then you die - but

not so much in one like the Arya one, which believed time is cyclical - first you are born, then you die, then you are born again. See how that works?

REQUIEM FOR THE DEAD

The Arya believed that Yama, Lord of the Dead, was the first mortal who died, and thereafter, found his way to the realms of the gods. When consecrating a dead man to the flames, therefore, it was him they pleaded with to guide the man's spirit 'home'. (Home, because the Vedas tell us we all came from a common source, to which we shall eventually return.)

Just like the fierce three-headed dog Cerberus, who guards the gates of the underworld in Greek mythology, the Arya believed that Sharvara (notice the similarity in their names?), Yama's four-eyed dog, guarded the entrance to Pitrloka, Yama's kingdom. Sharvara had a companion, another spotted, brindled dog like himself, and between the two of them, they managed to keep the dead inside the gates. Both dogs were believed to be the sons of Sarama, Indra's divine she-dog.* Sarama's sons wander among us although we cannot see them, sniffing around to identify Yama's next lot of passengers. We can also spot them in the sky on a cloudless night – Sharvara is associated with the constellation Canis Major and his companion with what else but... yup, the constellation Canis Minor (Canis is the Latin word for dog).

*Sarama has a whole hymn to herself in the Rig Veda! In it, she warns the cow-stealing Panis that her master Indra will be along soon to destroy them and liberate the stolen cows.

A Hymn to the Lord of the Underworld

Yama Sukta – 10.14

Come, O Yama, king who travelled first
To the lofty heights where the gods reside;

Pathfinder Supreme, partake of the feast,
And be kind to this man who has died.

(To the dead man)

Go forth, go forth, on the ancient paths
To the highest heaven, where your fathers wait,



Gain rewards for your earthly deeds –
Go home, to that blissful state.

Away, away, ye ghouls and demons –
This is not your place, 'tis his, 'tis his;
Run, man, past Sarama's four-eyed sons –
Oh King, grant him good health and bliss.

You four-eyed dogs, who wander among us –
Leave us be, thirst not for our breath;
O Yama, plead our case with the gods –
Accept our offering, keep us from death.

A TOAST TO THE DRINK DIVINE

We already know that the Arya gods were very particular about their food

(which is why the humans who conducted yagnas fussed so much over it). Naturally, one entire Mandala in the Rig Veda is dedicated to Pavamana (say pava-maana) Soma, or Soma the Purifier, the favourite drink of the gods.

As you can imagine, the process of extracting the soma was itself a ritual of giant religious proportions, with space set aside in the sacrificial ground for the purpose, maidens employed to press the stalks and cows on standby to provide fresh milk for the mixing as and when it was needed. And this ritual was performed – did you ever doubt it? – to the chanting of hymns, of course!

Here is a translation of the very first hymn of the Soma Mandala for you to enjoy.

A Hymn for Purification

Pavamana Sukta – 9.1

Flow, Soma, flow,
Flow sweet and pure –
Indra's beloved, our panacea, our cure;

Flow, precious draught,
Thou granter of wealth –
Demon-destroyer, bestower of health;

Flow through the maiden's fingers
As they grasp and press,
Come, our woes and fears to address;

Flow through the strainer
That Shraddha* spreads,
Emerge sweet and pure past the waiting threads;

Flow! The sacred herds
Are gathered here –
Their milk to blend with your juice so clear;

Flow, so Indra may drink
Of your rousing mead –
And slay his enemies, and our prayers heed.

PS: Hindu religious ceremonies no longer feature soma the drink, but the Soma Mandala is still very relevant. To this day, several of its hymns are chanted as part of a ceremony called the Pavamana Homa – a purifying ritual that is performed either when a new space is being inaugurated for use, or to cleanse a space of negative, toxic influences.

*Shraddha is the daughter of the sun. The word shraddha also means dedication, and its use here is perhaps meant to remind listeners that the preparation of soma was a sacred task that required one to be conscientious and focused.

HATED ONE, I CAST UPON YOU A SPELL!

Sure the Arya as a society prayed for the rain to fall and rivers to run full and the sun to shine, just so, in each season, but as individuals, they also had more pressing and more private concerns. The composers of the Vedas understood that and obliged, creating spells and incantations to take care of problems both big and small.

There were spells to be chanted over mothers-to-be for a safe pregnancy and birth, sleeping spells by which new mothers could ensure that their babies slept through the night (predictably, these were also chanted by burglars over the house they were about to break into!), death-repelling spells for healers to chant over their critically ill patients, and many more. Most

spells of this kind are to be found in the Atharva Veda, but there are a few in the last Mandala of the Rig as well. Here is one such for you to enjoy.

A Spell for the Destruction of Enemies
Sapatna Naashana* Sukta – 10.166

O Indra!
Make me
A bull among my peers,
A conqueror of my rivals,
A slayer of my foes,
An emperor among men,
A possessor of cows –
In short, make me like you!

O Indra!
May no one hurt or hate me,
May my enemies cower at my feet.
Like the two ends of the bow
Tied down by the string,
I tie you down, O Lord of Speech –
Press down upon the tongues of my rivals
Make them speak humbly to me.

O Enemies!
Here I come
As the conqueror of your minds,
As the conqueror of your deeds,
As your conqueror in battle,
As your leader and vanquisher!

I tread on your heads as you gather at my feet –
Now speak! as frogs croak when out of water,
Speak! as frogs croak when out of water.

*Sapatna is Sanskrit for a male enemy or rival, while Sapatni is the word for a female enemy. Sapatna Naashana translates to ‘destruction of male enemies’ while Sapatni Baadhana (the title of another hymn) translates to ‘abolition of female rivals’. The Arya made no bones about calling a spade a spade!

THE VERY LAST HYMN

As the Rig opens, so it comes to its close. The very last hymn of this sacred liturgy, like the very first one, is dedicated to Agni. But that’s where the similarity between the two ends.

The first hymn, as you saw, is a purely ritualistic (and somewhat self-serving) invitation to Agni to come and partake of the feast being laid out both in his honour and in the honour of the host of deities he is expected to bring with him, so that they may all shower humans with blessings and gifts.

But the last and 191st hymn of Mandala 10 is a secular, uplifting and large-hearted wish for a coming together of people, a sincere hope that cooperation will triumph over divisiveness in every sphere, that respectful debate will trump bitter and pointless argument every time. In other words, the Rig Veda, like all good literature, concludes on a note of hope, with a simple but beautiful prayer for peace – between friends, among families, and within communities. No wonder, then, that this last sukta is among the most popular of all the Rig Veda prayers, and is chanted on so many different occasions and at so many diverse fora, to this day.

And because it is so important, and so urgently relevant today, here is the latter part – the best-known part – of the 191st hymn, in the original Sanskrit. Commit this one to memory (it is super-alliterative, which makes this a nice challenge) and remember it every time you are tempted to let your anger or your ego ruin a good relationship. Teach it to others so that this 3,500-year-

old benediction of the ancient sages may ensure that in your little corner of the universe, a small but genuine effort is being made, every day, towards respect and acceptance of the ‘other’.

A Hymn for Unity

Sangacchadhvam Sukta – 10.191

Sangacchadhvam samvadadhvam

Sam vo manaamsi jaanataam

Devaa bhaagam yathaa poorve

Sanjaanaanaa upaasate

Samaano mantrah samitih samaani

Samaanam manah sahachittameshaam

Samaanam mantramabhimantraye vah

Samaanena vo havishaa juhomi

Samanee va aakootih samaanaa hrdayaani vah

Samaanamastu vo mano yathaa vah susahaasati

Let’s come together now, to speak our minds,

To raise voices in harmonious song,

Let’s work together, sharing our thoughts –

Like the wise have taught us all along.

May our prayer be one, our goal supreme,

Our brotherhood forever strong;

May the same fire inspire our toil –

United, we cannot go wrong.

May we march to the beat of a single drum,

May our hearts in kinship be bound,
May our minds concur despite dissent –
May harmony and bliss abound!



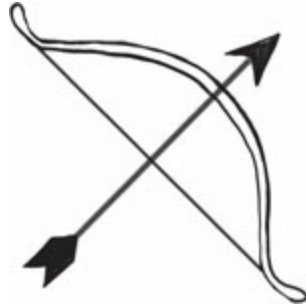
THE KNOWLEDGE, APPLIED

A brief note on the Upavedas

Before you ask, nope, the Upavedas have nothing to do with the original four Vedas. So what are they, then? Well, while the Vedas are the more theoretical and contemplative texts, the Upavedas used the Vedas as inspiration to spin off entirely new disciplines of study and practice. Just like engineering or architecture is really applied physics and/or chemistry, the Upavedas are the applied Vedas.

Which Indian systems of study qualify to be called Upavedas? There are four, each associated with one of the four Vedas.

- **Dhanurveda** –The art of warfare and the martial arts. Although Dhanurveda literally translates to ‘knowledge of archery’, it is a catch-all term for yuddhakala (the art of war), aayudhavidya (the knowledge of arms), veeravidya (the science of being a warrior), shastravidya (say shuh-stra, not shaastra, the science of weaponry) and svarakshaakala (the art of self-defence). Apart from archery and sword fighting, it incorporates the old Indian favourite – mallayuddha, or wrestling (any wonder we are winning Olympic medals in the sport these days?), and dvandvayuddha, or the art of the duel, which is a battle fought between two mighty warriors instead of two mighty armies (much less blood that way). Dhanurveda is associated with the Rig Veda.



- **Sthapatyaveda** – The ancient Indian art and science of architecture. It includes the theory of Vaastu Shastra, which is based on the philosophy that the design of a building must be integrated with nature and that there are certain symmetries and patterns that work better than others. It is really a collection of ideas - not rigid rules but helpful suggestions - on how space should be organized inside and outside a building, depending on which spaces are used for what purpose. Since the Yajur Veda contains information about building too, although mainly on the sacred patterns for yagna kunds, the Sthapatyaveda is associated with the Yajur Veda.



- **Gandharvaveda** – The sacred knowledge of the divine musicians called the Gandharvas, dealing with all aspects of the arts. It concerns itself especially with music, dance, drama and poetry, giving detailed instructions on, for instance, how a student must practise music in order to master it. More interestingly, the Gandharvaveda is a big champion of the idea of music as therapy, with the power to heal and nourish body, mind and soul. The Natya Shastra (*see page 79 for details*), is also part of the

Gandharvaveda. And this Upaveda is associated with – yup, that’s a no-brainer – the musical Sama Veda, of course!



- **Ayurveda** – Literally, ‘the science of life’, this best-known of all four Upavedas is the traditional Indian system of medicine and healing. Consistently popular through the millennia, Ayurveda is now seeing a huge resurgence. Based on the philosophy that individual human bodies are composed of three substances or doshas held in delicate balance, and that it is a skewing of this balance that causes disease, this physician’s art has eight main branches, including medicine of the body, the treatment of children, the extraction of foreign objects (which could involve surgery), antidotes against poisons, body-maintenance restorative tonics (think chyawanprash), and even – hold your breath – the exorcism and/or pacifying of spirits that have taken possession of a human body! Ayurveda is the Upaveda associated with... ye-es, the Atharva Veda. No points for guessing right – it is the only Veda left!





LESSONS FROM THE VEDAS

TO YIELD OR NOT TO YIELD?

Short answer: Easy! Do both, of course!

There is a constant tussle around the idea of flexibility. Is flexibility (and we aren't talking physical flexibility here) a good thing, or a bad thing? Let's consider two situations and see if we can find the answer.

Situation 1. You have made a pledge to yourself, say, that you will only watch one episode of a favourite series on Netflix each day. Then, when you are watching the penultimate episode of the season, you make a concession to yourself, saying, 'Just this once, *just* this one time, I will watch two episodes, because this one has ended on an insane cliff-hanger, and also, how can I not watch the season finale *right now*? Tell you what, I won't watch anything on Netflix tomorrow to make up for this transgression!' That sounds reasonable enough – after all, you are 'making up' for it the next day – and seriously, what's the big deal if you watch another forty minutes of Netflix when there isn't an exam tomorrow and you're done with all your homework? In fact, being inflexible about your pledge to yourself in this situation seems pretty silly.

Situation 2. Let's say you believe that people who work harder than others and put in more time at their jobs should get paid more (but of course, duh!). As a result of getting paid more, they will get richer than everyone else, build themselves bigger houses and drive fancier cars, buy themselves many acres of farmland, start big factories that will produce goods that will make them even richer, and so on. Sure, a family of four may not necessarily need that

much land or that much space or that much money, but hey, they worked harder and made the sacrifices and they deserve their privileges!

Unfortunately, your friend doesn't agree at all. She thinks that people who have more than they need should share their wealth with people who don't have enough. She believes that if such people don't share voluntarily, they should be forced to – either by their religion (many religions insist on this, some even specifying what percentage of a person's wealth should be shared with the community), their government (by way of taxes, for instance – the more you earn, the more tax you pay), or by the law (since 2013, it is mandatory in India for companies that earn a certain amount of money annually to spend two per cent of their net profits on something called CSR, or Corporate Social Responsibility, where they plough that money back into the community by either sending donations for disaster relief, sponsoring research in deadly communicable diseases, supporting government schools or poor villages, and so on).



You think this is patently unfair. To be *forced* to give away part of what you have rightfully earned is Simply Not OK. Your friend is disgusted at what she sees as your small-mindedness and lack of social responsibility, but

you don't back down. After all, if you keep backing down every time someone questions or looks down upon your beliefs, you will soon have no principles to live by at all. Sometimes, and about some things, one has to be completely inflexible.

Now, what do you think the Vedas would recommend in each of the two situations? What would they have to say about your decisions on flexibility in each case? There are four possible options – pick one.

1. They would totally agree with your decisions in both the cases.
2. They would say you should be completely inflexible in both situations.
3. They would say you should be completely flexible in both situations.
4. They would disagree with your decisions in both cases.

What option did you pick? If you picked 1, 2 or 3, so sorry, but those are the wrong options. Option 4 is the right option – the Vedas would recommend that you should be *inflexible* in Situation 1 and *flexible* in 2. Hang on a minute, you say – how do you know that for sure? After all, there was no Netflix in the Vedic Age, so surely the Vedic sages could not have commented on it!

Sure, but it is not Netflix itself, but the ritual of watching one episode a day that we are talking about here. You could easily replace Netflix with a Vedic ritual and ask – would the Vedic sages be OK with a student skipping the ritual or tweaking it occasionally if he 'made up for it' later by doing a double yagna or something? Of course they wouldn't. In the case of the following of a ritual, the Vedas demand complete compliance – it has to be done at the recommended times, in the recommended way, and no convenient short-cuts or 'adjustments' are allowed.

Similarly, replace the question of the rightness or wrongness of a forced contribution to society with the Vedic concept of how the universe was created. Many religions and cultures are pretty inflexible in their beliefs about

creation – in many states in the USA, for instance, schools do not teach Darwin's theory of evolution because the authorities do not believe man evolved from apes; they believe that it was God who created man, fully formed – but the Rig Veda itself offers several alternative creation stories. It is very flexible about its beliefs, and is not shy to admit that it isn't sure, that it does not know the truth, and is willing to keep an open mind until it does.

Do you have to go by what the Vedas say? Not at all. But the philosophy of 'Be inflexible about your rituals but flexible about your ideologies' has some good points. We have spoken about the benefits of rituals earlier (*see page 84*) so we don't need to go there again. As for beliefs and ideologies, they are not 'facts'* but 'opinions', which is why it is always better to keep an open mind to allow new data, fresh opinions and alternative points of view around and about them, to enter. If you don't, the wonderful and never-ending process of learning is stymied, and you are left with a stagnant ideology that will, sooner or later, begin to smell a little funky.

*Of course, the Upanishads recommend that everything, even so-called facts, must be routinely and thoroughly questioned.

But what if you continue to stick to your original beliefs after you have thrown open your mind, after you have closely examined and seriously considered the alternatives, and with all the respect they deserve? That's absolutely fine! As an extra bonus, you would have Gandhiji's approval. 'I do not want my house to be walled in on all sides and my windows to be stuffed,' he once said. 'I want the cultures of all lands to be blown about my house as freely as possible. But I refuse to be blown off my feet by any.'

THE SECRET

Next up, the Upanishads





SO WHAT'S THE BIG DEAL ABOUT THE UPANISHADS?



Right. Time for another quiz! Now that you have read about the Vedas in the previous chapters, you have already got some clues, so go right ahead!

1. What, exactly, are the Upanishads?

- a. A part of the Vedas
- b. Philosophical ideas and concepts that are based on the Vedas
- c. Conversations, usually between a teacher and a student, on complex questions like ‘What is death, *really?*’ ‘Who am I, *really?*’ and even, ‘What is reality, *really?*’
- d. The set of texts on which the Bhagavad Gita is based
- e. All of the above

Did you guess (e) all of the above? But of course you did! You already know what the Upanishads are, from the previous chapters, duh.

What’s important to remember is that the Upanishads are not just part of the Vedas, they are also often based on the ideas set out in the Vedas. They question, analyze and interpret the earlier parts of the Vedas, and move the Veda conversation forward. Hang on a minute, they say, so we’ve all been chanting all the hymns and performing all the sacrifices and rituals that the Samhitas and Brahmanas have prescribed, for centuries. Can we now ask

why (or if!) this ritual stuff is important? In fact, can we put the rituals aside for a bit and brainstorm about the really important questions like –

- ‘Since we are all going to die in the end anyway, what is the point of this life?’ or
- ‘Those gods that we are always offering things to so that we can have wealth, power, health, sons, whatever... do they really exist or did we create them because it makes us feel better to imagine there is someone powerful up there who we can arm-twist into giving us what we want simply by chanting the right mantras?’ or
- ‘Never mind the gods and the heavens and contentment in the afterlife – are there ways in which we can be truly content on earth? And if so, what are those ways?’

That’s pretty cool, don’t you think? That a sacred text (Veda) should have a section (Upanishad) that questions everything it has *itself* said? No wonder the doubting, inquiring, seeking Upanishads have found many, many fans both in India and elsewhere, and become far more popular than the Vedas themselves.

2. In all, how many Upanishads are there?

- a. 10
- b. 1,875
- c. 200
- d. 100,000

The correct answer is... (c) – there are about 200 Upanishads (give or take a few) in all. Luckily for us, scholars better and wiser than most of us can ever hope to be, have decided that only ten of those are what they call the Principal Upanishads. Phew.

Since the Upanishads are part of the Vedas, they also belong to Shruti, or ‘revealed’, literature, which means we have no idea who composed them.

However, some of them recount conversations of certain sages – including Yagnavalkya (say yaa-gnya-val-kya), Uddalaka Aruni, Shvetaketu, Shandilya and Sanat Kumara – with their students, learned kings like Janaka, or other scholars, notable among them Gargi (one of the very few women mentioned in the ten Principal Upanishads). It's fair to conclude, therefore, that these rishis were responsible for at least some of the main ideas in the Upanishads.

3. When were the Upanishads composed?

- a. Between 1500 BCE and 1200 BCE
- b. Between 1200 BCE and 900 BCE
- c. Between 700 BCE and 1 CE
- d. Between 1 CE and 300 CE

It's (c) again! The Upanishads were all 'revealed' between 700 BCE and 1 CE.

Since the Upanishads are often based on the earlier sections of the Vedas, they themselves were obviously composed well after those sections. But the timeline is all very confusing, and it is almost impossible to date them accurately. The only thing scholars can say with any confidence is that the oldest Upanishads (which include most of the Principal Upanishads) could not have been composed before the 7th or 8th century BCE, and the youngest ones (the youngest among the Principal Upanishads, i.e. – several others were composed much later, some as recently as 600 years ago) in the last century before the Common Era. That's a 700-year window, but hey, when those 700 years are over 2,000 years ago, it doesn't make all that much of a difference to us, does it?

The Upanishads are also often referred to as Vedanta (say ved-aan-ta), which translates to 'end of the Vedas' (veda + anta). They are the last section of the Vedas, which of course makes them Vedanta in a very literal way, but they are also the most difficult-to-grasp part, which is why they were always

taught to students towards the *end* of their Vedic studies, once their minds had been well trained in a certain way of thinking. There is a third important reason they are called Vedanta – once you’ve absorbed the wisdom of the Upanishads, the rishis seem to be telling us, you will never need to return to the study of the Vedas again, because the Upanishads contain all their wisdom, and more, in them.

4. What does the word ‘Upanishad’ literally mean?

- a. The smaller, or minor, Veda
- b. Dialogues of the wise
- c. Sitting close to, but at a lower level
- d. Up and down (derived from the Hindi ‘*upar-neeche*’)

The right answer is (c) – once again!

(Ha! Bet you didn’t expect that googly – three c’s in succession! Also, if you answered (d) – ‘The word Upanishad means Up and Down – from the Hindi words ‘upar-neeche’, think again – Hindi/Hindustani developed as a language thousands of years after Sanskrit!)

The word Upanishad is a combination of three Sanskrit syllables – *upa*, which means to move closer to, or be close to; *ni*, which means ‘at a lower level’; and *shad*, which means ‘to sit’.

So ‘Upanishad’ literally translates to ‘sitting close to someone, at a lower level’. But what does it mean *metaphorically*? Think about it. We know that the Upanishads were never meant to be read; like the rest of the Vedas, they were meant to be *heard* (remember they were originally only communicated orally!). Even more than verses or words, they were sacred ‘sounds’. To be able to catch every nuance of the speaker’s voice and every teeny change in tone and emphasis, therefore, it made sense to sit close to him or her. Plus, the teachings of the Upanishads are often referred to as the ‘paramam guhyam’ – The Ultimate Mystery, The Secret of Secrets. They would be

revealed only to the deserving, the ‘closest circle’.

What happens when you sit really close to the speaker, especially when that person is your teacher? Well, you are forced to concentrate – you cannot fidget, or text anyone, or sneak a look out of the window. Also, by the very act of *shad* – sitting down – you are making a commitment to yourself and the speaker; you are indicating that you are there to give him or her your full attention and are in no hurry to go anywhere. As for the *ni*, it is there to remind you that if you really want to learn what someone has agreed to teach you, it is important to humbly accept, for the duration of the lesson at least, that you are at a ‘lower level’ intellectually than he or she is.

So what the Upanishads teach us, by their very name, is a universal, eternal truth: if you approach learning with focus, dedication, humility, a receptive mind and respect for the teacher, there is very little chance that you will not *move* closer to understanding what is being taught. The best part is that, because the Upanishads are often structured as a dialogue between a teacher and a student, they also show us by example that the learning and teaching process works best when it is a two-way street. What you can take away from the most revered of our ancient texts is that it is not only OK, but *essential*, to question your teachers and parents when you don’t understand, or agree with, what they are teaching. See? You can totally leverage the Upanishads and their ‘universal, eternal truths’ to garner support for your cause – in the 21st century!

And *that’s* the **First Big Deal** about the Upanishads – although they were composed 3,500 years ago, when the world was a very, very different place (but human nature was very, very much the same), they teach us ways of being and thinking that we can use to live better, more fulfilling and more contented lives today.

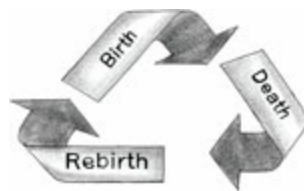
Sure, there are parts in them that are too obscure for many of us to

understand, too repetitive, or too irrelevant to our modern lives, but the fact that they also teach, encourage and celebrate the questioning of *everything* – including the holiest of holy cows, the idea of God – makes them pretty much ‘modern’, even scientific, in their approach to the world.

The **Second Big Deal** about them is that the ideas first expressed in the Upanishads have become the basis of what most Indians believe is the purpose of life, the meaning of death, and the nature of the entity called God. Their biggest influence has been on Hinduism, but they have also impacted the central ideas of other religions founded in India, such as Jainism, Buddhism and Sikhism. (And of course, the plot lines of our biggest religion, Bollywood.)

Here are some of those Big Ideas. How many have you heard of before?

- 1. Samsara or the Cycle of Rebirth:** When you die, it’s only your body that dies. Your soul simply moves on and makes its home in another body. If you’ve been good in this life, you are born human again and can proceed further on your journey to ultimate happiness. If you haven’t been so good, you might just end up as some other creature in your next life (like, say, a cockroach) and have to work your way up the hierarchy of creatures, until you are human again and have the ability to choose to do the right thing, or not.



- 2. Karma or Action:** No action is by itself right or wrong. But every action has a consequence, so think carefully before you act. Just because you seem to have escaped punishment for a bad action in the short term, don’t

become complacent. Karma will return to bite you in the butt in ways you can't even imagine. After all, it has loads and loads of time to make its move. (For more details, refer to point 1.)

3. Dharma or Potential: Depending on our innate disposition or nature, each of us has been assigned (or has chosen) a role to play in this lifetime – thinker, doer, leader, follower. That role takes on different shades as the play progresses – as you go from student to professional, child to parent, person-who-has-something-wonderful (health, money, power, fame, contentment) to person-who-does-not-have-it-any-more. It is our duty and responsibility to play our role to the best of our potential, in every phase, uncomplainingly, without hankering after someone else's (seemingly bigger or better) role.

4. Moksha or Liberation: Human life is full of toil and trouble. The highest goal of human life,* the way to true and lasting happiness, lies in breaking free of samsara's golden chains. If you are hardcore about performing your Dharma and doing good, thoughtful Karma in this lifetime, you may have a chance of getting there. After roughly two million more lifetimes of good behaviour. (Hey, no one said this gig was easy!)

* Moksha wasn't the only life-goal recommended by the ancient Indian sages – there were three other equally important ones. (*To find out what they were, go to page 152.*)

The Third Big Deal about the Upanishads is the set of conclusions all that questioning and analysis threw up. Those conclusions are so wise, so secular and so liberal that it makes a lot of sense to revisit them today, at a time when the world seems more divided than ever before. Here are some of the main ones:

- **The universe is not random.** There is an underlying order and harmony,

called *rita*, to everything around us (although that may be tough to believe when you are stuck in traffic at peak hour). Like clockwork, everything in the universe fulfils its duty according to the all-powerful ‘natural law’ – the sun rises and sets each day, seasons change, rain falls, the planets and stars move in their orbits, electrons spin and revolve around nuclei, things are born, and things die. Now, what is your excuse to not fulfil *your duty*?

- **God is not Santa Claus.** God is not making a list and checking it twice, to see if you’ve been naughty or nice – the good and bad things that happen to you are simply the result of the natural law of your own Karma. God does not demand from you worship, or that you flog or starve yourself to gain favour. God did not *create* you, as a mirror image or otherwise. God simply – hold your breath – IS you! Just as God is *every* other creature and tree and river and mountain in the world.
- **The world is only as real as Netflix.** Because all your organs of perception – eyes, ears, nose, mouth, skin – are turned towards, and consume, the world outside, and because that world is so bright and beautiful and tempting and demanding, you are tricked into believing that IT is the real thing, that it is the **ONLY** thing there is. When really, it is no more real than Netflix, a make-believe world your mind has created for its entertainment and then been sucked into.
- **Your body is only a costume.** Your form and shape of skeleton and flesh and everything in there are what you’ve chosen to wear for your role in this act of the long-running play called Life (or, more accurately, Lives). There will be other acts and costumes and roles. The person/entity you mean when you say ‘I’, is neither your costume nor your role but something far, far bigger, far, far better, and far, far more glorious than you can ever imagine. In the Upanishads, that indestructible, never-

changing core of your being, the *real* You, is called the Atman (say aat-mun).

- **You contain the universe.** You are not minuscule or insignificant – you are luminous, magnificent, large enough to contain the universe! For there is only one Universal Energy, one Supreme Consciousness, that is inside (each of) us and around (all of) us. We may each call it by a different name – Shakti, Shoonya, Allah, Yahweh, Ahura Mazda, God – but that only reflects our own individual choices and tastes (hey, it's a free country!). In the Upanishads, this supreme, all-pervading energy is called Brahman (say Bruhm-mun).



- **You were not created by God, you ARE God.** The point of your life as a human being is to realize that Atman is Brahman, i.e., You are God. No, seriously. Also, that everybody around you is God too. When you truly see this truth, and embrace it, when you realize that everyone – despite their different skin colours and ‘weird’ ways of speaking and eating and worship and whatnot – is just you in a different form, it is somewhat unlikely that you will insult them or despise them or want to destroy them (because by doing that, you are only insulting or despising or destroying

yourself).

Instead, you will begin to revel in the fact that you can live so many different lives at the same time, that you can be man and woman and child and white and black and brown and Dutch and Eritrean and Peruvian and Kurd and Jew and Muslim and Parsi and vegetarian and non-vegetarian and Rafa Nadal and P.V. Sindhu and tree and river and dog and bird and anything or anyone else you want to be. You will make it the focus of your life to understand all those different versions of you, by making each of them your teacher. You will engage in conversations and interactions with them that are marked by humility, respect, gratitude and an open mind (just like the Upanishads have taught you). And you will learn from their mistakes, and rejoice in their successes, and share in their grief, and live their experiences, and become a finer, wiser person each day because of it.

In other words, you will *move* closer to becoming the God that you are.



HOW THE WEST WAS WON

Hint: It involved a Mughal prince, a French Indologist
and a German philosopher

In their own land, the Upanishads have been known and revered for over 2,500 years. Their explosive, original ideas influenced Vardhamana Mahavira, who founded Jainism in the 6th century BCE, and Gautama Buddha, who founded Buddhism about a hundred years later.* When Buddhist missionaries travelled to far-flung parts of Asia, like Sri Lanka, Japan, China, Korea, Tibet, Mongolia and Bactria** to spread their religion in the 2nd century BCE and after, they took Upanishadic ideas like

reincarnation and Moksha with them, making them popular in the Far East.

*There is some disagreement about this among scholars – while some say Upanishadic ideas influenced Jainism and Buddhism, others insist it was the Buddha's ideas that influenced the Upanishadic sages. Until we can date the Upanishads accurately, this argument looks likely to continue. Most non-scholars, however, are simply happy to enjoy the wisdom of these ideas, wherever they originally came from.

** A historical region in Central Asia that today would cover parts of Afghanistan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan.

But how – and when – did word of humankind's oldest, and arguably among the most original philosophical ruminations get out to the western world? Thereby hangs a fascinating tale.

The year, so the story goes, was 1640. Prince Dara Shikoh, firstborn son and heir apparent of Mughal emperor Shah Jahan, was on holiday in Kashmir with his beloved wife Nadira Banu when he first heard of the ancient texts called the 'Upanekhats' (his word for the Upanishads).

Like his great-grandfather Akbar before him, Dara was a liberal who had always been fascinated by mysticism and spirituality, and believed that no matter what the name, there was only one God. Like Akbar, he would also devote a large part of his life to finding common ground between Hinduism and Islam.

Most excited to hear about this sacred literature that his Hindu subjects assured him was among the holiest of the holy, he convened a gathering of scholars from the great city of Banaras (now Varanasi) at his Delhi palace on the banks of the Yamuna, the Manzil-e-Nigambodh, and had them explain to him every possible meaning of the fifty or so Upanishads they had at their disposal. Over the next few years, he personally translated (so it is believed) all those 52 Upanekhats into Persian, finding several parallels between their teachings and those of the Quran, especially with respect to their ideas about the oneness of God. In fact, he became convinced by the end of it that the

‘hidden book’ of wisdom – the *Kitab al-maknun* – mentioned in the Quran was none other than the Upanishads.

In 1656, Dara Shikoh’s translation was published as the *Sirr-e-Akbar* (The Greatest Mystery), bringing upon his head the wrath of orthodox Muslims, chief among them his ambitious younger brother Muhiuddin, otherwise known as Prince Aurangzeb. A bitter battle for succession was brewing, and Aurangzeb saw his chance. In 1659, after having usurped the throne and declared himself Emperor, he denounced crown prince Dara as a heretic and had him beheaded.

Given that anything associated with Dara was now a hot potato, *Sirr-e-Akbar* should have by rights disappeared into the mists of history, never to be seen again. And that might have well happened, if it hadn’t been for Dara Shikoh’s personal physician, Monsieur Francois Bernier.

M. Bernier had got himself a ‘super-fast’ medical degree after an intensive three-month course in his home country in the 1650s. Unfortunately, that abbreviated degree did not allow him to practise on French territory, and so, a few years later, M. Bernier took off to the East to do what he really wanted to – travel. He reckoned he could also put his medical skills to use along the way, but never imagined he would end up where he did – as part of the team of royal physicians who attended the Mughal emperor himself!

When the good doctor went back to Paris in 1671, after also having served as Emperor Aurangzeb’s doctor for a dozen years, he carried a copy of *Sirr-e-Akbar* back with him. Hanging out with Dara Shikoh’s Sanskrit pandit had given Bernier himself a deep insight into the Upanishads, and he was very attached to the translation. Within Bernier’s own circles, the Upanishads thus became known.



From top: An amazing three-way connection: Mughal prince Dara Shikoh, French Indologist M. Anquetil-Duperron and German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer

But another hundred years would pass before M. Anquetil-Duperron, famous as the first ‘professional’ French Indologist and the person who introduced the Zoroastrian holy book, the Zend Avesta, to Europe, got his hands on a copy of *Sirr-e-Akbar*. Now, while Sanskrit wasn’t a language that people on the street, even in India, were fluent in, Persian was not only the official language of the Mughal court but also a language that many Europeans, including Anquetil-Duperron, spoke well. In 1775, he decided to retranslate *Sirr-e-Akbar*, first into French, and then into Latin.

Anquetil-Duperron’s Latin translation ‘*Oupnek’hat or Upansichada*’, when published in 1801, was the very first European-language translation of a ‘Hindu’ text, ever. In the spring of 1814, the translation came to the notice

of the famous German philosopher, Arthur Schopenhauer, who was so taken with it that he repeatedly called it his favourite book of all time. What's more, he declared that among the entire body of world literature, the Upanishads were the texts most worthy of being read.

Not everyone agrees with Schopenhauer's interpretations of the Upanishads [but spare the poor man a thought – he was working with a (Latin) translation of a (French) translation of a (Persian) translation of a Sanskrit work!]. But he was so respected and his work had such a huge influence on other western philosophers, that after his exuberant pronouncements about them, there was a sudden and renewed interest in the Upanishads not just in Europe but back in India as well. Today, they occupy a pre-eminent place in literature as one of the world's greatest philosophical works.

And all thanks to a curious, large-hearted, liberal-minded, questioning Muslim prince who knew in his heart that there was always common ground to be found between seemingly disparate peoples and cultures and ideas and religions, if only one made the effort to look.

PS: Dara Shikoh's palace, the Manzil-e-Nigambodh, was called that because it stood close to the Nigambodh Ghat, Delhi's oldest ghat for performing Hindu funeral rites. Believed to have been first set up by Pandava prince Yudhishtira himself, the ghat is also thought to be the spot where another landmark mythological event occurred. The story goes that the Vedas had been lost to humanity after Lord Brahma, believed to be their originator, was cursed by Yamuna, and lost his memory as a result. When, relenting, Yamuna returned the Vedas to her banks, she did so at the Nigambodh Ghat. A grateful Brahma took a dip in her holy waters, and wisdom was restored to the world.

In fact, the word 'Nigambodh' literally translates to 'understanding of the

Veda'. Pretty cool that the prince who helped take the 'understanding of the Veda' to the world lived at that very spot, wot?

MASTERMIND!

Presenting – *tan-tan-taraa!* – the Ultimate Challenge:
The Conquest of the Mind



Circa 700 BCE. Elaborate, expensive and inflexible rituals had taken over every aspect of Arya life. Increasingly, the rituals were performed simply because they were part of tradition, with very few people trying to understand their true significance. Society had become rigidly hierarchical, with people of the upper varnas (or upper classes) cruelly discriminating against those of the lower ones. What's more, they insisted that they had the divine sanction of the Vedas for doing so.

This kind of claim seemed outrageous to the liberal-minded thinkers of the time, who believed that all people, regardless of gender and varna, should be treated fairly and with kindness. Surely the holiest of their holy texts did not actually recommend exploitation and oppression of those who were different or less fortunate!

Reluctant to dismiss outright the sacred texts that their forefathers had lived by, these liberals decided to go back to the originals for a closer look. Maybe, if they studied them with an open mind and complete focus, they would find the secret code that cracked open the true message of the Vedas! Retreating into tranquil forests where there were few distractions, these thinkers spent years studying, analyzing and debating the message of the

scriptures, while putting aside the largest chunk of time for deep and solitary reflection.

And what were their findings? A range of different ones, actually. Some thinkers came out roundly criticizing the rituals, and all the grovelling that people did in the name of worship, declaring that human endeavour should be directed not towards pleasing some god outside of us, but finding God inside ourselves. The fire that needed tending, they said, was not the one in the yagna kund, but the flame of true knowledge that burnt so brightly inside us. The real yagna was not about sacrificing animals but about sacrificing negative energies like ego, greed, hate and anger.

Others said there was nothing wrong with physical, external rituals, as long as one remembered their metaphorical meaning. It was important to remember, for instance, that the horse sacrificed during the Ashwamedha yagna, bringing power and glory to the person performing the sacrifice, was only a symbol for the universe – one had to give up one's attachment to material things like wealth and success and fame, which come and go – for more permanent rewards like peace and contentment.

Meanwhile, some truly enlightened sages came up with beautiful, powerful ideas like *ahimsa* (non-violence) – which the Buddha championed, and which was later adapted to great effect in the political arena by Emperor Ashoka and Mahatma Gandhi – *damyata* (self-control), *datta* (generosity), *daya* (compassion) and *satya* (a truth-justice-‘rightness’ combine that goes well beyond ‘not lying’).

It was these thinkers who also produced the four Mahavakyas, or Great Pronouncements, which are different ways of expressing the mightiest central idea of the Upanishads – Atman is Brahman; you are God.

(You will find the Mahakavyas later in the book, as part of the Upanishads they belong to. When you find one, remember to say ‘Eureka!’.)

They put these epiphanies down as they struck them, these ancient sages of India, in rambling chunks that had neither a clear theme nor logical sequencing, over hundreds of years (obviously, it wasn't all the same sages – even powerful sages did not live that long). Today, we know these collections of illuminating, ecstatic revelations as the Upanishads.



THE MENTALISTS

The 'true message of the Vedas' was only *one* outcome of the whole exercise of questioning. All those years spent in deep and focused contemplation helped these thinkers travel well beyond the Vedas, to unknown realms. The cool part was that these realms were not outside of themselves – they didn't travel to the top of Mt Everest or darkest Peru or the frozen wilds of Antarctica – but deep inside their own minds!

Thousands of years before psychoanalysis was a thing, these sages explored the least probed recesses of the human mind and played around with

different states of consciousness (the state of being awake, the dream state, the deep-sleep state – *Inception*, anyone?). They discovered, to their wonder and delight, that the world inside our minds was just as vast, complex, stunningly beautiful and dangerous to negotiate as the world outside, and far more difficult to conquer. More importantly, they found that while the joy that came from conquering the world outside was short-lived, if only because that world was constantly changing, the deep contentment that came of conquering the world inside was not only long-lasting and unchanging, but also made the conquest of the outer world seem, well, less important.

That is an exciting enough thought in itself, but before you go haring off to conquer your inner world, it might be a good idea to ask what you are actually supposed to be looking for when you plumb the depths, or how you will know that that world has been conquered. It might also help to find a wise teacher to help you get there, for the Upanishads are categorical that no one can go on this journey without an experienced guide.*



*How does one find that wise and experienced spiritual guide? Just like one finds the perfect tuition teacher – by looking around, getting recommendations from friends and seniors, taking a few trial classes and asking yourself some hard, honest questions at the end of it. Questions like – Do I feel comfortable around this teacher? Do I understand a concept better after she has taught it to me? Does she allow me to ask questions (which are sometimes admittedly dumb)? Does his teaching style involve pushing me hard or letting me be? (Both methods work, but for different kinds of students – the trick lies in picking a teacher whose style works for you.)

The analogy does not end there. Just like you may have to suffer several bad or unsuitable tuition

teachers before you find the right one, you may have to try out several spiritual guides for size before you settle on a good one. Here's what's vital, though:

- Even after you think you've found him or her, make sure you keep questioning yourself about what you want from a teacher, and reflecting on whether your teacher fulfils those conditions.
- Be careful not to stay with a particular teacher simply because 'everyone says he's the best'.
- Most importantly, always remember that spiritual guides come in all shapes and forms – they need not be wearing saffron or white or green or have long beards or shaven heads. Anyone who lives his or her own life gently, calmly, compassionately, responsibly and cheerfully is a great guide!

Why is a guide so important, though? Because, while it isn't so hard for the human brain to understand the 'inner world conquest strategy' at an intellectual level and it isn't so difficult to *tell* someone else how it is done, it all becomes a lot more complicated when you actually have to do the conquering yourself, for it's your own brain, or more correctly, your own *mind*, that you are trying to study and observe and conquer! As you can imagine, that is like entering a hall of mirrors, where everything is bound to get very confusing. Plus, this whole journey into the inner world is not about 'understanding' things, but about 'experiencing' things and 'intuiting' things. And we all know that that intuition, while it often happens by chance, isn't easy to come by in a conscious way.

It is for this reason that the Upanishads insist on a guide. Eventually, of course, you will have to find your own way, but it will certainly help to get tips from someone who has already been there, at least part of the way, to tell you of his or her experience at each stage (like how reading up the reviews on Zomato gives you a much better idea of what to expect from a restaurant than reading the menu does).

But back to our original question – how will you know that the destination has been reached? The ultimate prize in this ultimate quest for everlasting contentment and peace, say the sages, is the mind-blowing realization that your life-force, the energy that fills you with life and light, is nothing but the all-pervading life-force of the universe itself. When you know

that truth – declare the sages – and feel it, deeply, wholly, in every cell of your being, you have arrived.

ENTER THE CODEBREAKERS!

Once the ancient sages had themselves ‘arrived’, they hastened to share their revelations with the world. Which was great.

The trouble was, these revelations were spread across sprawling collections of poetry and prose, and were almost always oral in transmission, making them almost impossible to access in their entirety by people who had livelihoods to earn and families to take care of. Moreover, the thoughts expressed in them often bordered on the mystical, and spoke of ideas and places and experiences that ordinary people, even the most imaginative and intellectually adept among them, could not fully fathom.

The precious wisdoms may have been lost to common folk but for the efforts of a small, select band, who began to put down their own interpretations of these wisdoms in simple terms that everyone could understand. They made sure to include lots of relevant examples as well, so that more people could benefit.

The best-known of these ancient ‘CliffsNotes’ to the Upanishads are the **Brahmasutra** and the **Bhagavad Gita**. Together, the sacred triad (that number again!) of the Upanishads, the Brahmasutra and the Bhagavad Gita is considered to be the true and complete Vedanta (distillation of the Veda), containing all the guidance you need in your quest for the Brahman inside you.

The Brahmasutra, composed by a sage called Badarayana, is difficult to date accurately, but it was probably composed around the time when BCE turned to CE (or a couple of hundred years earlier, or a couple of hundred years later – you know how this goes). It comprises a set of 555 sutras, or

verses, divided among four chapters that neatly and brilliantly collate, organize, classify and summarize all the lessons and wisdom of the sprawling Upanishads.

There's more to like about the Brahmasutra – like a good NCERT science lesson, it starts by introducing the Topic (Brahman), goes on to the Definition (What is Brahman?), does a 'Review' of different theories about it (What do the Hindu texts say about Brahman? What about the Buddhist texts? And the Jain texts?), clears up apparent contradictions within the Upanishads themselves, lays down the steps of the 'Process', all the way to the 'Result', Moksha, in a step-by-step bullet-point format, and concludes with the 'Uses and Benefits' of setting off on the Great Brahman Quest.

The Brahmasutra works great as a handy guide to the Upanishads for the logical learner who wants his facts straight, but for the romantic who prefers his wisdoms laced with a nice dose of spectacle and melodrama (which is most of us), another kind of treatment was needed. Enter, stage right, the Bhagavad Gita, the most compact, comforting and accessible friend, mentor and teacher of the Upanishads that anyone could want. By cleverly locating some of the most complex philosophical ideas in the world on a battlefield, with a war about to begin, Veda Vyasa, the author of the Gita, takes the lessons of the Brahmasutra out of the textbook and into the laboratory, shifting it dramatically, and effectively, from Theory to Practicals. By delivering the Upanishads' highest wisdoms via a conversation between two best friends, both of whom we know so well from a time much before the war, he grabs our attention and converts 'Pure Philosophy' into living 'Applied Philosophy'.

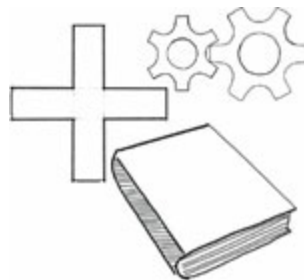
Wow – 360-degree learning, anyone?

#LIFEGOALS

Purushartha – the Hindu mission statement for the ideal human life

While it is quite common, even essential, for countries and businesses to have clearly articulated goals and aspirations, it is not often that you find a religion that has one. We are not talking rules here – every religion has those by the bushel – but a set of recommendations on how to lead a good and upright life. Here are the four goals, called Purushartha, of human life, as conceived by the sages of ancient India.

- **Dharma** – Doing your duty, fulfilling your responsibilities (to yourself, your family and your community), leading a morally upright life and living up to your potential, whether you are student or daughter or father or teacher or boss or doctor or construction worker.



- **Artha** – Having a goal and purpose in life, which includes the accumulation of material wealth. This may sound surprising, but the sages of the Vedas were pretty pragmatic. Realizing that a life of dignity required a person to be able to provide himself and his family with food, shelter and clothing, they set down the pursuit of Artha (wealth) as a noble goal, as long as it was done in accordance with Dharma. That meant that exploiting others or coveting wealth beyond one's needs was out, unless one also gave the extra wealth away to the less fortunate or used it to better the community. The sages were also pretty ruthless – by making Artha a

goal, they sent out a clear message: ‘Frittering away time aimlessly, drifting along without giving back to the community and general navel-gazing are a strict no-no. Make yourself useful!’ Ouch.



- **Kama** – The pursuit of pleasure. Yup, the Vedic sages were so woke that they even put the pursuit of pleasure down as a legitimate goal of human existence! Love, affection and anything that pleased the senses or was considered enjoyable – a beautiful sunset on a beach holiday, the smell of the earth after the rain, listening to a concert by your favourite pop star, the feeling of your dog’s soft fur, slurping up your grandmother’s kheer, hanging out with your friends – were all considered not only good, but necessary ingredients in a life well-lived. Once again, though, pleasure had to be chased within the rules of Dharma – going to a movie on the day before your exams wouldn’t work, for instance, because it would clash with your Dharma as a student, which would demand that you spend that time studying.



- **Moksha** – The quest for ultimate happiness and the most complete and blissful kind of freedom. While Dharma, Artha and Kama are all worldly pursuits, and are very important – after all, we all do live in the material world – Moksha urges you to be detached from those very same worldly

pleasures, i.e., love, hate, wealth, success!



Eh? How can all four be the goals of human life if one of them, Moksha, is at complete odds with the other three, or at least two? Expectedly, the ancient sages debated this question a lot – until they found a way to reconcile the two, with a killer concept called ‘Nishkama Karma’ (action without attachment). It was Krishna who explained the concept to Arjuna, and through Arjuna, to us, so famously in the Bhagavad Gita – ‘Do your duty (i.e., enjoy your concert, or go work at a job), but don’t become attached to the result of that action.’ In other words, go work at a job, but don’t make earning money (or loving your job) the object of your work; love your friends as much as you like, but don’t expect that they should love you back in exactly the same way; study as hard as you can to fulfil your Dharma as a student, but don’t fret if you don’t top the class as a result. Do that, they said, and the effects of being ‘worldly’, i.e., pursuing pleasure and wealth, will not bind you, and you will be free.

Got that? Sure. Cool concept? Maybe. Easy to follow in real life? *Well...*



SHANKARA'S FAVES – THE TOP TEN UPANISHADS

Lists, rankings, peace prayers and other essential
Upanishadic basics



You know by now that while there are differences of opinion on exactly how many Upanishads there are, ‘around 200’ seems to be a figure everyone is comfortable with. Of course, we haven’t actually been able to lay our hands on the manuscripts of all 200 – we only know many of them existed because some other Upanishad, or some other text, refers to them, or because we have found a *commentary* on the Upanishad (and not the Upanishad itself), written by someone who lived hundreds of years later.

The Muktika Upanishad, composed about 600 years ago, is one such text. It puts down what is considered a ‘Definitive List’, in which it names 108 Upanishads. What of the other ninety-two? We are not sure – either they did not make it to the coveted list because they were not considered worthy, or they were composed after the Muktika went to press. (Yes, not all the Upanishads are over 2,000 years old!)

But even 108 Upanishads are too many to discuss in a book like this. So we shall take refuge, as so many have in the past, in the scholarship of the 8th century boy mystic from Kerala – Shankara – who, after studying as many

Upanishads as were around in his time, wrote expansive, illuminating commentaries on ten of them (or possibly eleven, but the eleventh commentary has never been found, so we shall go with ten for now). Because Shankara was so highly regarded, those ten Upanishads have come to be celebrated as the Mukhya, or Principal, Upanishads, and occupy the Top Ten position in the Muktika's Definitive List as well.

What was good enough for Shankara is surely good enough for us, so in this book we shall stick to discussing only the Principal Upanishads. Deal? Deal. (*For the story of Shankara, check page 169.*)

Here, then – drum roll, please! – is the list of Shankara's Chosen Ones.*

*The following info is strictly for stats and trivia nerds. If you aren't one, go back to reading the main text.

- Shankara's hand-picked Upanishads made it to the 'Top Ten' in the Muktika's list as well. The Muktika humbly lists itself in the 108th place as the one that completes the list.
- This list is not in chronological order. The oldest Upanishads are, in fact, the last two on the 'Top Ten list', from around 700 BCE. The youngest of the ten are the Prashna and the Mandukya, from around the 1st century CE.
- The span of time over which the 108 Upanishads were composed is about 2,000 years, starting with the Brihadaranyaka and ending with the Muktika in the 15th century. Phew.

1. Isha
2. Kena
3. Katha
4. Prashna
5. Mundaka
6. Mandukya
7. Taittiriya
8. Aitareya
9. Chandogya
10. Brihadaranyaka

Wait. Stop. Don't just skim the list! Pause, and *actually* read the list,

saying the words in your head or aloud. Of course the words probably don't mean anything to you right now, but don't worry about that. Instead, focus on their sound and cadence, like students did in the old times.

Notice what a nice rhythm the names have when spoken in sequence, and how the number of syllables progresses steadily from two – in Isha, Kena, Katha, Prashna – to three – Mundaka, Mandukya – to four – Taittiriya, Aitareya. Then comes the anomaly, the three-syllabled Chandogya, but perhaps that was snuck in there to help you catch your breath, so that you'd have enough left in the tank for the formidable, six-syllabled, final one – the dense and sprawling BRI-HAD-AAR-AN-YA-KA.

Wasn't that fun? Onward!

Now, each Upanishad – not just these ten here but every other one as well – is part of one Veda or another (as we discussed not so long ago, the Upanishads are the fourth layer of the Vedas). So let's put down the list again, this time connecting each Upanishad to its Veda.

1. Isha – Yajur Veda (Shukla)*
2. Kena – Sama Veda
3. Katha – Yajur Veda (Krishna)*
4. Prashna – Atharva Veda
5. Mundaka – Atharva Veda
6. Mandukya – Atharva Veda
7. Taittiriya – Yajur Veda (Krishna)
8. Aitareya – Rig Veda
9. Chandogya – Sama Veda
10. Brihadaranyaka – Yajur Veda (Shukla)

*Remember we talked about two versions of the Yajur Veda in Chapter 4? To recap, one version, the one in which the four layers of the Veda are neatly separated and organized, is called the Shukla Yajur Veda, and the other, in which the four layers are all a bit mixed-up, is called the Krishna Yajur Veda.

Moving on. Each Upanishad is not only associated with a particular Veda, but also with a special invocation or prayer called a Shanti Mantra, which is essentially a prayer for peace. Before you start reading an Upanishad – or, more correctly, ‘listening’ to a teacher explain its essence to you – it is recommended that both of you chant the peace prayer associated with it.

Right, now let’s put down our list of Upanishads yet again, this time tagging each with its respective Shanti Mantra. You can skip this list if it feels like too much information for now, but you will be able to come back to this ready reckoner any time you need to.

1. Isha – Yajur Veda (Shukla) – *Aum poornamadah poornamidam*
2. Kena – Sama Veda – *Aum aapyayantu mamaangaani*
3. Katha – Yajur Veda (Krishna) – *Aum sahanaavavatu*
4. Prashna – Atharva Veda – *Aum bhadram karnebhih*
5. Mundaka – Atharva Veda – *Aum bhadram karnebhih*
6. Mandukya – Atharva Veda – *Aum bhadram karnebhih*
7. Taittiriya – Yajur Veda (Krishna) – *Aum sahanaavavatu*
8. Aitareya – Rig Veda – *Aum vaang me manasi pratishtithaa*
9. Chandogya – Sama Veda – *Aum aapyayantu mamaangaani*
10. Brihadaranyaka – Yajur Veda (Shukla) – *Aum poornamadah poornamidam*

PSALMS FOR CALM

How to Peace Out, the Upanishadic way

What is the point of the Shanti Mantras? And why should they be recited before the study of an Upanishad? Simply because the sounds and words of these mantras are believed to create an atmosphere that quietens the mind and facilitates learning. As a collateral benefit, they also help calm the

community and the environment around the student. Which isn't that hard to believe, considering that all of them end with that most calming of calming phrases – 'Aum Shantih Shantih Shantih'.

Why *three* Shantihs? One explanation is that it is because the mantra invokes three kinds of peace – peace in the mind (easy enough to understand), peace in speech (i.e., an absence of extreme emotions like anger, fear, hate, great joy or excitement when one speaks, because it is only then that the mind can think – and the tongue can speak – clearly and rationally) and peace in the body (a steady pulse, a deep rhythmic breath, a happy gut). Another explanation is that the triple Shantih calls for peace within oneself, peace in the community and environment, and peace in the universe. Both theories are quite lovely, don't you think?

The other nice thing about the Shanti Mantras is of course, their aspiration. Seriously, who could have a problem with prayers that ask for nothing other than peace, not only for oneself but for everyone else as well? (FYI, you don't have to restrict yourself to chanting these mantras only before you study the Upanishads, you can chant them at any old time at all – when you're feeling stressed and want to calm yourself down, just before you begin a particularly challenging music or maths lesson, when your two best friends are mad at each other, when you have just had a huge family row, or simply when you are feeling wonderful and calm and want to share your bliss with the world!)

The third thing (everything related to the Upanishads seems to come in threes!) is that these mantras aren't the I've-never-heard-them-before kind of verses. Many of you are probably familiar with at least a couple of them and may even have chanted them at home or at school, without ever knowing that they had such a deep connection with the Upanishads.

Time now to take a closer look at the Shanti Mantras – how many do you

recognize?



Shanti Mantra of the Rig Veda Upanishads

(To be chanted before studying the Aitareya)

Aum vaang me manasi pratishtithaa

Mano me vaachi pratishtitham

Aavira-avir-ma edhi

Vedasya ma aaneesthah

Shrutam me maa prahaaseeh

Anena-adheetena-ahoraatraan-san-dadhaami

Ritam vadishyaami satyam vadishyaami

Tan-maam-avatu tad-vaktaaram-avatu

Avatu maam avatu vaktaaram

Aum Shaantih Shaantih Shaantih ||

Aum!

I pray

That my words make their home in my mind,

That my mind makes its home in my words,

That the knowledge of my true self reveals itself to me,

That my mind and my speech work in harmony to help me
understand,

That I do not just hear the lesson, but understand it,

That what I learn and practise night and day is never lost to me.

May this Divine Truth that I speak today

Protect my teacher

And protect me.

Aum Peace Peace Peace.

Simple enough to understand, this prayer asks for mind and speech to work harmoniously, as one unit. What are you really asking for here? That your monkey-mind doesn't jump around, completely distracted, thinking about the fun party you have been invited to this evening, while your mouth repeats words after the teacher. (Remember, 'repeating after the teacher' was a HUGE part of learning in the days of oral transmission – today, you would probably pray for your eyes and mind to be in harmony – so that you are not just looking at the teacher, your mind is actually processing what she is saying as well – or for your fingers and mind to be in harmony – so that you are not playing Hangman with your seat partner but actually making notes about the lesson.)

The part where the chanter prays for knowledge to be retained is also important – please, God, I've done my bit and studied hard, now can you please, pretty please, help me remember all of it in the exam hall? The prayer ends with a lovely wish for the teacher – now that's something you probably don't think about doing, but should!



Shanti Mantra of the Sama Veda Upanishads

(To be chanted before studying the Kena and the Chandogya)

Aum aapyaayantu mamaangaani

Vaak-praanas-chakshuh-shrotram

Atho-balam-indriyaani cha sarvaani

Sarvam brahma upanishadam

Maaham brahma niraakuryaam

Maa maa brahma niraakarod

Aniraakaranam astu aniraakaranam me astu
Tadaatmani nirate ya upanishatsu dharmaah
Te mayi santu, te mayi santu
Aum Shaantih Shaantih Shaantih ||

Aum!
I seek blessings
That my limbs, speech, breath, eyes, ears, strength
And all my senses be nourished;
I pray
That I may never deny Brahman or be disloyal,
That Brahman may never forsake or reject me;
I, the seeker, ask
That all the wisdoms of the Upanishads
Shine in me,
That they all shine in me.
Aum Peace Peace Peace.

If you substitute the word Upanishads with whatever skill or lesson or craft you are trying to master, this simple, heartfelt prayer for strength and health of all kinds – mental, physical, emotional and spiritual – is a mantra that works well. After all, no quest – whether it is summiting Everest or mastering quantum mechanics – can be undertaken unless the mind, body and spirit are at peace, and in perfect harmony with one another.

It's important to note that while the seeker hopes fervently that Brahman never forsakes him, he is careful enough to put in a little reminder for himself as well – he asks that he may never deny Brahman either. Imagine if we always did that with our prayers as well – ‘Please, God, make Dad get me that new device I’ve been longing for, but make sure too that I am never rude

to Dad.’ Or ‘Oh, I hope-hope-hope that the girl/boy I really like talks to me in school today, but I equally hope-hope-hope that I will not spread awful rumours about her/him if she/he chooses to not like me back as much.’ That would totally make for a world full of Shantih-Shantih-Shantih, don’t you think?



Shanti Mantra of the Shukla Yajur Veda Upanishads

(To be chanted before studying the Isha and the Brihadaranyaka)

Aum poornamadah poornamidam poornaat poorna-mudachyate

Poornasya poornamaadaaya poornamevaavashisyate

Aum Shaantih Shaantih Shaantih ||

Aum!

That is complete, and This is complete,

From That completeness comes This completeness;

If you take completeness away from completeness,

Only completeness remains.

Aum Peace Peace Peace.

Say *what?* Uh-hunh, this particular Shanti Mantra is a bit mind-boggling, and you wonder if it is deliberately meant to confuse. Logically speaking, if you take something away from something – completeness from completeness in this case – how can the original thing, even if that thing is ‘completeness’, remain? But as we discussed in an earlier chapter, this kind of paradox is typical of the Upanishads, especially when Brahman or God is being described, as he is in this case.

Completeness – a quality of being whole, unified, and independent of

anything and anyone else – is something human beings see as superhuman. After all, we are all deeply dependent, in one way or another, on something or someone. We constantly seek completeness – a best friend, a soulmate, a passion to follow, likes on Instagram, success, approval from others and a tonne of other things to feel complete, to feel happy. But we realize very quickly that this kind of completeness is transient. It departs quickly, and we are soon on the streets looking for it again.

Brahman, on the other hand, is the epitome of completeness. This mantra is a prayer asking him to guide us towards that completeness. And where may we find this completeness? *Right within us!* As the mantra says, ‘*That completeness*’, i.e., Brahman, is ‘*This completeness*’, i.e., Atman, your individual soul. Once we find it, we will be blissfully happy.

And what of taking completeness away from completeness? Brahman, says the mantra, does not become diminished, not even a tiny little bit, by splitting Himself into a million creatures in a million ways, just as the flame of a candle burns just as bright even after lighting a hundred other candles. In exactly the same way, you will not become diminished by giving of yourself – your love, your attention, your compassion, your respect – to every other creature in the world. Therefore, advise the sages of the Upanishads, give! Give recklessly, prodigally, unabashedly, and don’t be afraid – for when you take completeness away from completeness, only completeness remains.

What a beautiful message, right? Remind yourself of it every time you chant this Shanti Mantra.



Shanti Mantra of the Krishna Yajur Veda Upanishads

(To be chanted before studying the Taittiriya and the Katha)

Aum saha naavavatu

Saha nau bhunaktu
Saha veeryam karavaavahai
Tejasvinaavadhita mastu maa vidvishaavahai
Aum Shantih Shantih Shantih ||

Aum!

May He in the Highest Heaven
Protect both of us, teacher and student;
Nourish both of us together
So that we may work together with great energy,
So that we may learn from each other,
So that our learning is effective,
So that we steer clear of dispute and discord.
Aum Peace Peace Peace.

With its strong message that learning is a two-way process in which both teacher and student are mutually benefited, this is a great prayer to put up in classrooms and school corridors. If the part about ‘learning from each other’ is something you may want to draw your teachers’ attention to, the part petitioning for an absence of dispute and discord is probably something your teachers wish you would keep in mind. The plea that both teacher and student be protected and nourished is important too – it tells us that learning is not effective unless both parties are equally committed to the task and participate in it with a healthy respect for each other.

PS: This may also be a great way to approach conversations in general, even when, say, you are in the middle of an argument with a friend. Treating the other person as your teacher (since you don’t know his point of view and are trying to ‘learn’ it from him), giving him your full attention and respect, and listening with an open mind may be the shortest and most sure-shot route

to resolving conflict.



Shanti Mantra of the Atharva Veda Upanishads

(To be chanted before studying the Prashna, the Mundaka and the Mandukya)

Aum bhadram karnebhih shrinuyaama devaah

Bhadram pashyem-aakshabhir-yajatraah

Sthirair-angais-tushtuvaamsas-tanoobhih

Vyashema devahitam yadaayoooh

Svasti na indro vriddhashravaah

Svasti nah pooshaa vishvavedaah

Svasti nastaarkshyo arishtanemih

Svasti no brhaspatir-dadhaatu

Aum Shaantih Shaantih Shaantih ||

Aum!

Ye gods, bless us

That we may hear words that are pleasant

And see things that are blessed,

That we may live our lives in ways that nourish you.

O great Indra, O All-Knowing Poosha,

O Garuda, destroyer of evil, O great teacher Brihaspati,

Take care of us, blessed ones!

Aum Peace Peace Peace.

This prayer is straightforward enough, a nice general-purpose bless-us-with-everything prayer that can be pulled out on any occasion at all. But if

you look carefully, it isn't all gimme-gimme-gimme. The chanter is also promising to play his part in the universal cycle of give-and-take by promising to live his life in a way that nourishes the gods. How can one do that? Simply by doing his or her duty without fear or malice or love or hate, by fulfilling responsibilities calmly and cheerfully, and by remembering, always, to be grateful.



ADI SHANKARA

The boy saint who restored the Vedanta

Some 1,500 years after the oldest Upanishads had been composed, and over a thousand years (give or take a few centuries) after the clearest, most concise and most creative compilations of their wisdoms – the Brahmasutra and the Bhagavad Gita – had been put together in the north of India, a baby boy was born in the little town of Kaladi in what is now Kerala, in the deep south. His fond parents named him Shankara, but more about him in a bit.

Let's first look at what had transpired in the country after the ten great Upanishads had been composed. The Vedic religion, which had receded somewhat from centre stage under Emperor Ashoka – who had embraced Buddhism – was seeing a resurgence, thanks to the generous patronage of the Hindu kings of the mighty and long-lived Gupta empire. On the ground, however, things had gotten pretty chaotic among the inheritors of the ancient texts. Scores of contradictory and downright confusing interpretations had sprung up, and dozens of popular sects had mushroomed under the broad umbrella of the religion we call Hinduism today.

Among these sects were atheistic ones like the Charvaka; ritual-loving

ones like Mimamsa, which embraced the Vedas and rejected the revelations of the Upanishadic sages as a bunch of mystical mumbo-jumbo; and others like the Samkhya, which believed that while it was quite possible that a God existed, we shouldn't waste time over Him because our lives, our actions and our choices were guided only by our own free will. This diversity of thought and belief was wonderful, and the debates they generated mind-expanding; the only shame was that the followers of these sects fought so much with each other.

A lot of other action had also happened over the same thousand years. The practitioners of the Vedic religion had crossed the Vindhyas and travelled south, taking their gods and their philosophical ideas with them. The no-longer-new religions of Buddhism and Jainism had travelled too and won themselves a country's worth of new recruits while the Hindu sects squabbled. Meanwhile, Christianity and the brand-new religion of Islam had made a quiet but definite entry via the south-western coast.

Fortunately for Hinduism, splintered and anxious with this bubbling of sects and opinions, a new and charismatic sage – a towering intellectual who not only knew the original, liberal core of the scriptures like the back of his hand but could also present them simply and lucidly – showed up around the 8th century.

No one realized at first that the messiah had arrived. Far from the matted dreadlocks and snow-white beards of the old sages, this one had a shaven head and no facial fuzz – he had, in fact, barely begun to shave. He was sixteen years old, and his name was Shankara.

Who was this boy Shankara? When was he born? Where did he get his spiritual inspiration from? What was his life like? When did he die? Sadly, we simply don't know. All we have on Shankara today is the stuff of legend and folklore, so we cannot be sure of any of it. But that doesn't really matter,

because there are some really lovely stories there, like this one about how the eight-year-old Shankara arm-twisted his widowed mother into letting him become a monk.



Once, when the two were bathing in the river (so the story goes), a crocodile clamped its jaws on Shankara's leg and began to drag him down.

'You have never given me permission to become a sannyasi, Mother,' yelled Shankara, 'at least give it to me now, in my last moments, so I can die happy!'

'You have my blessing!' sobbed his petrified mother. Instantly, the croc let Shankara go.

Soon after, the grateful eight-year-old set out happily on his chosen path. The story goes that he walked some 2,000 kilometres from his home in Kaladi to the ashram of his chosen guru, Govinda Bhagavatpada, on the banks of the river Narmada in central India. When the guru asked him who he was, the boy answered, 'Neither fire nor air not water nor earth nor space am

I, but the indestructible Atman that is hidden inside all names and forms.’ Impressed with the boy’s instinctive understanding of the ultimate reality, the guru accepted Shankara as his disciple.

In the next four years, Shankara attained mastery of the scriptures. Around this time, an intense monsoon broke. The Narmada was in spate, its dark, roiling waters rising wildly and threatening to flood a cave where Bhagavatpada sat in the deepest of deep meditative states, Samadhi. The students of the gurukul were in a tizzy, for they were completely forbidden to disturb their guru when he was in Samadhi. It was Shankara who placed his kamandala at the mouth of the cave then, calmly proclaiming that it would contain the floodwaters within itself. To everyone’s wonder, that was exactly what happened. When the guru later heard what had happened, he blessed Shankara, saying, ‘Just as you contained the flood in your little kamandala, may you distil the essence of the scriptures into your writings.’

Encouraged by his guru’s words, Shankara began to write commentaries on the Upanishads, the Brahamasutra and the Bhagavad Gita. At the age of sixteen, he was done with the writing, and ready, with his guru’s blessings, to embark on the next phase of the journey – spreading the good word. For the next sixteen years, Shankara walked across the length and breadth of the country, spreading the explosive and egalitarian message of the philosophy called Advaita* and engaging in public debates with scholars who espoused a different point of view on what the scriptures said or the right way to live.

* One of the three most popular schools of Vedantic thought of the past millennium, Advaita (which means ‘not two’) philosophy takes its cue from the Upanishads, reiterating that there is no difference, none at all, between Atman (one’s indestructible soul) and Brahman (the constant, unchanging reality that is the life-force of the universe). In other words, there is no ‘other’ – beyond our bodies and our minds and our intellect, we are all the same and we are all divine. Advaita thought existed before Shankara, but he is its best-known and most influential teacher.

Gurus who came after, like the 11th century saint Ramanuja and the 12th century teacher Madhvacharya, however, disagreed with Advaita, saying that it only suited monks who had rejected the

world. Both also accused Shankara of considering only those sections of the Upanishads that supported his own theories. The world, said Ramanuja and Madhva, was real, not something you could detach from and wish away, and the path to liberation lay in embracing one's worldly responsibilities and fulfilling one's duties as householders and soldiers and priests, all the while leading morally upright lives.

They came up with their own different and more 'practical' philosophies, which they said encapsulated the true message of the Upanishads.

Ramanuja's version was Vishishtadvaita, which believes that Atman and Brahman are not the same (i.e., you are not God), but agrees that every Atman can attain Brahman because they share the same divine essence. Madhva's radically different version was Dvaita, which insists that Atman and Brahman are not at all the same. There is only one Brahman, and while some Atmans can attain Brahman by choosing to do what is morally right, those Atmans that insist on choosing to do the wrong thing are doomed forever.

Despite their differences with Advaita, or perhaps because of it, both Vishishtadvaita and Dvaita found their own loyal sets of followers. To this day, these three schools of Vedantic philosophy continue to influence millions of Hindus in India and across the world.

Shankara's peregrinations, and his inclusive philosophy, expressed in pithy and powerful phrases like '*Brahman Satyam, Jagan Mithya, Jeevo Brahmaiva Na Para*' (Brahman is the only truth, the only constant – focus on it; Jagan, the world, is only a material reality – stay detached from it; Jeeva, the individual soul, is no different from Brahman, the soul of the universe – believe it!) caught the imaginations of the splintered Hindus and gave them a guiding slogan to rally around.

It helped that for all his high-level philosophical musings, Shankara was also a practical soul – to bring together different groups that worshipped different gods and fought about which one was greater, he formulated a system of worship that included the six most popular gods of the time – Vishnu, Shiva, Shakti, Ganesha, Muruga (Karthikeya) and Surya (quite a different list from the top gods of Vedic India, what?) – while repeating that they were all really one and the same. He even formulated a system of ritual worship for each of these gods, to be followed at their respective temples, cleverly nipping in the bud all the conflicts that might arise over those.



Adi Shankaracharya by legendary painter Raja Ravi Varma

Shankara was also a most efficient organizer, with a great vision to boot. In the course of his travels, he established the Chaturdham [aka Char Dham, the four centres of Advaita in the four corners of the country – the Sringeri Math in Sringeri (in present-day Karnataka), the Sarada Math in Dwarka (Gujarat), the Jyotir Math in Badrinath (Uttarakhand) and the Govardhan Math in Puri (Odisha)] – put his most enlightened followers at the head of each, and entrusted each Math with the guardianship and propagation of one of the four Vedas.

He also continued to write extensively. Apart from some eighteen commentaries on existing texts, including ten of the Upanishads, Shankara left as his legacy twenty-three books explaining every nuance of the Advaita philosophy and seventy-two beautiful devotional hymns that are sung to this day.

Then, having made sure that the main teachings of the Vedanta, as he saw them, had been restored to the front and centre of the Indian philosophy stage, he went off on an expedition to the holy site of Kedarnath, and was never seen again. At the time he left, Shankara was all of thirty-two.

But his life's work had been done. To this day, some 1,200 years after his death, he is loved, revered and celebrated as one of the Jagadgurus – Supreme Teachers – of the Upanishads.



Now that you have read this far, have you noticed one big difference between the Vedas and the Upanishads? That's right – while the Vedas describe rituals and invoke gods of one particular culture or people, the Upanishads talk about universal truths that anyone from any culture can relate to and live by. But perhaps what is even more wonderful about the latter is that they allow for several interpretations, including some seriously contradictory ones – the debate is never over, the jury is always out.

In the next ten chapters, as we skim (very lightly, and in no way exhaustively!) the surface of the ten greatest Upanishads, you will have a chance to experience their power, beauty and wisdom for yourself (finally!). And you will see what a...

Aaaarghhh! Enough with the build-up already! On to the No. 1 Upanishad on the Muktika's list – the Isha!



ISHA

The Upanishad of the Sameness of All Things

In which we learn that the single-minded pursuit of knowledge can, um, throw you into the most blinding darkness



Aum!

*That is complete, and This is complete,
From That completeness comes This completeness;
If you take completeness away from completeness,
Only completeness remains.*

Aum Shaantih Shaantih Shaantih ||

THE BACKSTORY

At a mere eighteen verses (one version has only seventeen), the Isha (say ee-sha) Upanishad (aka the Ishaavaasya Upanishad or the Ishopanishad) is one of the shortest of them all. But what makes it special is that unlike other Upanishads, the Isha is not the fourth layer of the Shukla Yajur Veda; instead, it is part of its Samhita (or the first layer) itself, as its fortieth, and concluding, chapter. Remarkably, while the rest of the Samhita is all about the yagna rituals (which is really what the Yajur Veda is

about), the fortieth chapter is highly philosophical, and in fact, disses those who focus only on the rituals and not on the truth behind them!

The Isha gets its name from the very first word of its very first verse, ‘Ishaavaasyam’. Isha simply means Lord or Ruler (it is the root word of ‘Ishvara’, the Vedic term for the Supreme Being*). While some Upanishads are written as stories, the Isha isn’t. It is a straightforward set of philosophical reflections on:

1. Brahman and Atman (but of course!);
2. True Knowledge (vidya) vs False Knowledge (a-vidya);
3. The specific fates that await those who seek vidya alone and those who revel in a-vidya alone (both are tossed into the dark worlds of ignorance); and
4. The ways in which death can be overcome and immortality gained.

Whoa! That’s a lot to pack into eighteen verses, but the Isha does it remarkably well.

* Think! You have encountered the word Isha as part of the names of many, many Hindu gods – and people! For instance, Ganesha, or Ganesh, is formed from the words ‘Gana’ and ‘Isha’ and means ‘Lord of the Ganas’, while Suresh is Indra, the ‘Lord of the gods (or Suras)’, Naresh is ‘Ruler of Men (or Naras)’, Umesh is the ‘Lord of Uma (or Parvati)’ and therefore another name for Shiva. And Sarvesh and Rajesh and Paramesh? Go on, figure them out yourself!

THE STORY

RENOUNCE AND REJOICE!

Shloka 1

*Ishaavaasyam idam sarvam yat kim cha jagatyaam jagat
Tena tyaktena bhunjeetaa, maa grudhah kasyasvid dhanam*

*The whole world is Isha’s abode;
He dwells in everything, of everyone He is a part,*

*So covet not what is another's,
Instead, renounce and rejoice, dear heart!*

Mahatma Gandhi once said, famously, that if all the Upanishads and all the other Indian scriptures were suddenly and irretrievably lost to humankind, and only the first verse of the Isha Upanishad (the one above) were left in the memory of the Hindus, Hinduism would live forever.



His words may seem an exaggeration, but if you take a closer look, the verse does seem to contain a lot of the core principles of Hinduism – (a) your soul is divine, i.e., you are divine, for the Supreme Being lives within you; (b) setting aside external appearances, no other animal, vegetable or mineral

is really different from you because it contains the same divine essence as you do; and (c) to ‘renounce attachment’ to things and people is the only way to bliss.

How can ‘renouncing attachment’ bring bliss? Well, although something ‘appears’ to be yours – your parents, your high rank in class, your position as vice prefect at school, even your opinions – it really isn’t. In fact, says the Isha, you have only been given all of it as a gift, a blessing, on short-term lease, by the One who actually owns it all. Which is why, getting too attached to any of it is foolish. It’s like getting attached to a book you have borrowed from the library and insisting that it is yours simply because it is in your room at this moment, even though you know you have to return it the next day.

Of course, ‘renouncing attachment’ to your parents does not mean you don’t care what happens to them (just like ‘renouncing attachment’ to a library book does not mean you can let your dog chew it up). It just means that you treat their time with you, and yours with them, as a precious gift. It means that you respect them and their right to guide you in ways that seem right to them. It means you don’t get mad at them because they seem to favour your sibling over you, or because they decided to go off on a holiday by themselves (how selfish are they!). Instead, says the Isha, be grateful for all that they *have* done for you. When you do this, i.e., flip that perspective switch inside your head, you stop thinking of your parents as your property and stop expecting them to treat you, and you alone, as the centre of their universe. In other words, you ‘renounce attachment’ to their actions towards you.

The concept of renouncing attachment to your opinions, your prejudices, your fears, your loves and your hates is easier to understand, but is equally difficult to practise (what might help, somewhat, is to sing ‘*Let It Go*’ from the movie *Frozen* at the top of your lungs while you’re trying to renounce

something, like, say, your dislike for the partner you've been saddled with for the history project). You do see why this renouncing must be done, though, right? If you don't, you will eventually turn into a petty, bitter and angry person, and you certainly don't want that.



Think about it. When you stop having expectations of other people, and are grateful instead, when you are willing to keep an open mind to let fresh, exciting and contradictory opinions flow in, leading to a more informed, empathetic and better understanding of situations and people, what else but bliss can follow?

PS: Now ask your parents to read this section, substituting 'children' for 'parents' in the para about renouncing attachment to parents, and watch... ahem... their reaction. It's your Dharma as their child to make sure the Isha's wisdom reaches them too!

MIRROR, MIRROR, EVERYWHERE!

Shloka 6-7

He who sees all beings in himself

*And himself in every being there is,
Love fills him, and disgust flees –
As delusion recedes, he brims with bliss.*

These two shlokas need no real explanation, but their egalitarian message, which follows from shloka 1, is vitally important. When you see every person around you as having the same essence as you, you will be less likely to dislike or hate him or her; instead, you will see their victories as your victories, their happiness as your own.

The real source of our unhappiness comes from seeing others as different from us; all our negative emotions – envy of others' successes, anger at other people's attitudes towards us, revulsion at the way others look or dress or act, or at the gods they worship or the food they eat – stem from the delusion that they are different from us.

The same thing applies to our relationship to other creatures – animals, birds, insects. When we judge them in relation to ourselves – as lovable or repulsive, threatening or non-threatening, useful or irrelevant – we unconsciously place a value on their lives, deciding which creatures (or trees, or mountains) are more important than others, and which, therefore, are more deserving of our respect, care and protection.

If we see ourselves 'in every being there is', however, we become instantly conscious of how each of them fits into the ecosystem of the universe in a complex but vital way. We understand, deep down and for real, that every creature has as much of a right to its life as we do to ours. Suddenly, every creature's pain will begin to resonate with us; never again will we be able to turn a blind eye to atrocities against animals, trees, rivers, the air, the earth.



The Isha insists that the ‘separateness’ that we see between us and everyone and everything else is like a veil drawn over the eyes of our souls. It exhorts us to rip the veil apart and see the world for what it really is – a place in which the countless wonderful manifestations of the One gather to dance and play. Once we realize this, it is only one more step to treating our fellow creatures right.

THIS OR THAT? NAAH. THIS *AND* THAT? ALWAYS!

Shloka 9-14

Into blinding darkness

Enter those who worship ignorance;

A worse fate awaits those that delight in knowledge;

Into darkest night

Enter those who believe only in what the senses experience;

A worse fate awaits those who insist that the only truth is what the senses cannot;

For He is different from ignorance,

*and different from knowledge –
So the wise tell us.*

*He is different from what is visible,
and different from what is not –
So the wise tell us.*

*He is beyond all that exists – transcendent,
And inside all that exists – immanent,
So the wise tell us.*

*Knowing one and not the other
Is futile; he who knows
Both ignorance and knowledge,
He who experiences
Both the world outside and the world inside,
He who rejoices
In both the transcendent and the immanent –
He is blessed,*

*For he passes beyond death by the one
And wins immortality by the other.*

Eh? A man who delights in knowledge will come to a worse fate than one who is happy to wallow in ignorance, i.e., someone who is content doing mindless action? Yup, according to the wise sage who composed the Isha (Nope, we haven't got our lines crossed here)!

How can that be? After going on and on about how the world outside is a delusion and an illusion, how can the Isha sit there and tell us, smugly, that the man who believes that there is a world of the spirit (that which is not

visible) that is greater than the material world (that which is visible),* is hurtling towards a night darker than someone who believes the opposite?

*You will hear the word ‘material’ used a lot when the scriptures are discussed – material world, material possessions, material pleasures. What does the word really mean? Well, the root word of ‘material’ is ‘matter’, so material means anything that is made of matter, anything that you can touch and feel and see, that has form and that you can measure. Material things are things like wealth, measured by possessions; or success, measured by your position in a race or in an organization; or power, measured by how many people you can influence. Even something like beauty (of the body) is material, for the body is matter too. The word ‘physical’ is often used interchangeably with ‘material’, because it means the same thing. The ‘opposite’ of material (and physical) is spiritual, and it refers to the spirit of something, its essence, which cannot be seen or touched or measured, but can only be experienced. Spiritual ‘things’ are feelings, thoughts, emotions, happiness, grief... Most scriptures of most religions will advise you not to give too much importance to physical or material things, and to focus instead on spiritual things.

Because, boys and girls, the operative word for a good life, a blissful life, a blessed life, is *balance*. Extreme beliefs (whichever end of the spectrum they may sit on) and exclusionary beliefs (i.e., beliefs that exclude every other belief) simply do not wash with the sages of the Isha. It’s all very well to believe that the Real Truth can only be experienced by meditating in a forest, but hey, everyone has responsibilities to fulfil in the material world as well! The pursuit of Moksha has to be balanced by the pursuit of Dharma, Artha and Kama! Escaping your responsibilities to go after a selfish pursuit, however noble it may seem, is simply not A-ok by the Upanishads.*

*It was not A-ok by Krishna either, in the Bhagavad Gita. When Arjuna wanted to escape his responsibilities as a warrior and a king, and run away from the battlefield, because he simply could not bear the thought of bringing down his nearest and dearest in a bloody war, he saw himself as doing the noble thing. Krishna was quick to point out that he was kidding himself, and this was exactly the kind of there’s-no-escape lecture poor Arjuna got.

Krishna’s larger message, as is the message of the Isha, is to all of us – the householder’s life (in your case, the student’s life) with its never-ending, never-changing routine of work and responsibility, is no less noble than the hermit’s life, which is spent in prayer and meditation. What’s more, the rewards of the worldly life, when it is lived with the understanding that there is something beyond the material, are just the same as the rewards of the ascetic life. Hurray!



Again, while it may be true that what cannot be experienced by the senses is What Really Counts, we are unfortunately born into bodies that can only experience the world via the senses. Denying and rejecting the beauty and endless variety of the world of the senses while chasing Things That Really Matter is just as bad as denying and rejecting the sublime world beyond the senses, and spending your life chasing Things That Don't Really Matter.

In fact, if you have the *knowledge* of this truth, and yet *your action* is not in keeping with it (i.e., you live your life as if the material world and its rewards – fame, power, wealth – was everything), your sin is greater than that of the ignorant person, who lives a life of pure *action* simply because he doesn't know any better. Similarly, if you know that the scriptures say that every creature is equal, but don't follow it up with appropriate *action* (i.e., you treat your fellowmen badly), yours is a 'sin of commission' and thus deserving of a greater punishment than those who haven't bothered to go to the scriptures at all, for theirs is merely a 'sin of omission'. You see why those who live by *knowledge* alone are condemned to a worse fate than those who live by *ignorance (or action) alone*?

And therefore, says the Isha, do your Dharma, fulfil your responsibilities, do the right thing, be a role model. In short, live fully and joyously in the material world, performing the kind of actions that make it a better place for everyone around you. But *know*, always, that there is a world beyond what

you can see and hear, which can only be gained by (1) believing in the underlying unity of all things and (2) being detached from the ups and downs, the praise and scorn, the joy and grief, and every other pair of opposites that are an inseparable part of living in the material world.

In other words, *tena tyaktena bhunjeetaa* – renounce and rejoice!

THE GREAT SECRET – REVEALED!

Shloka 15-16

*O Pooshan, I've heard it told –
The Truth lies hidden by your disc of gold;
O Lord of Light, now hear my plea –
Dim your brilliance so I may see.**

*Thy radiance dims, the One emerges
In me, a wondrous wonder surges;
For when I raise my eyes to Thee –
What do I see? That I am He!*

The tone of the Isha changes suddenly here, as if the composer was suddenly overwhelmed with devotion. Shlokas 15 and 16 are addressed to Pooshan, another name for the sun, and end with the resounding declaration *So'ham Asmi ! – I am He!*

So'ham Asmi is not traditionally considered one of the four Mahavakyas, or Great Pronouncements, of the Vedas, but it is essentially saying the same thing every other Mahavakya is – I am He, Thou art That, You are God.

*Does that bring to mind a similar plea from another beloved Indian work? Yup, the plea that Arjuna made to Krishna in the Bhagavad Gita, when Krishna displayed his cosmic Vishwaroopa form, as brilliant as a million suns, on the battlefield of Kurukshetra! 'Dim your brilliance, Lord,' Arjuna begs him then, 'so I may behold what is behind the light.' Krishna obliges, but the Truth is so awesome and so terrifying that Arjuna cannot bear to look upon it.



REMEMBER, REMEMBER!

Shloka 17

May breath merge into immortal breath!

As body turns into ashes – Aum!

O Mind, remember what's done, remember!

Remember what's done as you go home!

While the 18th and last shloka of the Isha, which is also the last shloka of the Shukla Yajur Veda Samhita, is a simple and fairly typical prayer to Agni for blessings and guidance, the penultimate one, Shloka 17, seems a little out of place as far as its content is concerned. It has the same heightened emotional tone as the previous two shlokas, but is nowhere near as ecstatic. Instead, it is an urgent exhortation chanted over a funeral pyre to the mind and intelligence of the person who has died, asking him to remember all the deeds of his life just past, for they will impact and influence his next life.



We will never know why the composer of the Isha decided to bring this particular verse into it, but that does not reduce its impact or importance in any way. In fact, so long is the shadow cast by this particular shloka that it is

used as part of Hindu funeral rites to this day.

Aum Shantih Shantih Shantih ||



KENA

The Upanishad of ‘Whence-Came-It-All’?

In which we discover that the reason we can’t
recognize Brahman is that He has (smartly!) never
shared his photograph



Aum!

I seek blessings

That my limbs, speech, breath, eyes, ears, strength

And all my senses be nourished;

I pray

That I may never deny Brahman or be disloyal,

That Brahman may never forsake or reject me;

I, the seeker, ask

That all the wisdoms of the Upanishads

Shine in me,

That they all shine in me.

Aum Shaantih Shaantih Shaantih ||

THE BACKSTORY

Another short Upanishad, the Kena is part of the Sama Veda, the Veda that

A Krishna, in the Bhagavad Gita, hailed as the loveliest of the four. The Kena has a rather unusual structure. Of its four chapters, the first two are in verse and are philosophical reflections, while the last two of are written in prose, and relate a story and its epilogue. The whole Upanishad takes the form of a dialogue between teacher and pupil. Its name, as in the case of the Isha, is taken from the first word of its first shloka.

What does the Kena broadly deal with? There are two main subjects:

- (1) Nothing happens, nothing moves, nothing is possible, without desire, so whose desire is it that moves the universe? From where, from whom, does that desire originate? (*Kena is Sanskrit for 'from whom'*); and
- (2) The difficulty – even for the gods – of understanding the nature of Brahman the Supreme.

As always, before getting into the Upanishad, take a minute to reflect on its Shanti Mantra (you'll find it on the previous page) and ask that its wisdom may shine in you.

THE STORY

The teacher and the pupil sat in companionable silence under the peepul tree, ready to begin the day's lesson. The boy was a little fidgety this morning, his eager, shining face more impatient than usual. He was a rare one, this boy, thought the teacher, with his many, many questions, his insatiable curiosity and his willingness to work harder than his fellows – he would go far. Chuckling to himself, he decided to put the boy out of his misery without delay.

'So,' said the teacher, 'tell me, what burning question has troubled you all night? What do you want to learn from me today?'

'Oh sir,' began the student, 'From whom comes all of it – my thoughts, my sight, my hearing?'

‘Who is He
Who makes my mind soar and my speech flow,
And my eyes see and my breath grow,
And my ears hear and my thoughts go?’ *

*Being a modern, rational, science-loving 21st century student, who does not believe in all this god mumbo-jumbo, you might well ask the same questions of your science teacher, changing the ‘Who is He who...’ to ‘What is it that...’ His or her answers, however, may not be much clearer, or more satisfying, than those of the teacher here, because even science does not have answers to these questions yet. More than 2,500 years after the Upanishads were composed, the Great Secret, the Eternal Mystery of Life, is still just that – a thrilling secret and a ginormous mystery.

Ah, the big one. All his best students got to that one at some point. The teacher took a deep breath. ‘Son,’ he said –

‘He is
The hearing behind hearing, the speech behind speech,
The sight behind sight, in a place beyond reach.’

The student listened, rapt. He didn’t quite understand what that meant, but he wasn’t going to interrupt, not yet.

‘He is
What words cannot express, seed of all that is uttered;
What the mind cannot grasp, by which thought is bestirred;
The wellspring of hearing, itself never heard.’

That sounds so beautiful, thought the student. But what does it mean?

‘Inconceivable, unperceivable, indescribable, Supreme –
That is Brahman, not the one they deem.’

The student nodded. It was all a little hazy still, but he thought he had a

fair idea of Brahman now. Brahman was clearly not Indra or Agni – ‘not the one they deem’. He clearly wasn’t someone you could please and get favours from by pouring ghrita and soma into a fire – he was wayyy more complicated than that.

‘I think I understand,’ said the student. ‘Thank you.’

The teacher smiled to himself. If only Brahman was that simple to ‘understand’, if only he could be ‘understood’ at all by the limited human intellect! He looked at the young upturned face and shook his head. Some tough love was called for.

‘If you think “I know it well”, son, perhaps you do, but know that you know only a tiny, tiny part, which He chooses to reveal to us here on earth. For there is one part of Brahman that dwells among the gods, and *that* – that you have yet to discover. Ergo, back to your toil! Think about what I have told you, meditate, contemplate – there’s a long, long way to go yet!’

The student flushed.

‘I do not think that I know Him well, sir,
But I would not say that I do not, either.’

The teacher was impressed in spite of himself. The boy was not one to be cowed easily. Perhaps it was time to take him a little further. ‘You see, my boy,’ he said, ‘the difficulty with Brahman is this –

‘The one who knows Him, knows Him not
And the one who sees it, knows not
That he sees what he sought.’

The student’s face fell. How would he ever know Brahman then? If his teacher was to be believed, it was a futile quest. Clearly, Brahman was not someone who could be *understood*, he could perhaps only be *experienced*.

But the ones who had experienced Him, it seemed, could not share the experience, because they didn't even realize it had happened!* But the teacher was speaking again.



*Dr Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, an Indian scholar-statesman, in his commentary on the Upanishads, quotes Plotinus, a philosopher from ancient Greece, to beautifully illustrate this seeming inability of those who have 'seen' to share the vision with others. 'In other words,' says Plotinus, 'they have seen God and they do not remember? Ah, no: it is that they see God still and always, and that as long as they see, they cannot tell themselves they have had the vision; such reminiscence is for souls that have lost it.'

That sounds confusing, but it's just a olde-worlde way of saying that you cannot 'remember' something when it is still part of you. It's only when you no longer have something – your old phone, long hair, a toy you played with when you were little – that you can 'remember' it. Those who have seen God, Plotinus is saying, cannot 'remember' seeing Him because once that happens, He becomes an integral part of that person, forever.

The teacher's words in the story have another meaning too – if you don't know what the person or thing you are seeking looks like, how will you identify it when you see it?

'But when the truth a man finally sees,
He becomes immortal, undying, ceases to cease.

Should that wisdom come to him on earth,
He escapes forever the cycle of rebirth;

If it does not, let him beware,
For great destruction awaits the unaware.'

Would that wisdom ever come to him? wondered the student, a little despondently. It seemed as if there was no way to make sure it would. The teacher's heart went out to the boy. He decided to throw in a little tip.

‘But he who sees Him in each and every being –
He is blessed, in worlds both seen and unseen.’

Well, that was a bit of hope there, at last! thought the student to himself. That was something he could try to work towards. If he treated all his fellowmen and fellow creatures like he treated himself – with respect and kindness – maybe, some day, he too would experience Brahman. But the question still remained – would he recognize Him when he did?

The teacher's voice broke into his soliloquy. ‘Let me tell you a story,’ said the teacher, ‘of how the gods were once humbled.’

‘I am all ears, sir,’ smiled the student. Trust his teacher to know when to break a low mood, with one of his stories! The stories were fun on the surface, but they usually came with a hidden lesson. He leaned in eagerly to give it his full attention.

‘Once upon a time,’ began the teacher, ‘a great war was fought between the gods and the demons. The gods won and started to congratulate themselves, feeling invincible in their victory. ‘We did it, boys!’ they exulted. ‘We did it all by ourselves! How cool are we!’ They did not pause for a moment to reflect, or to give thanks to the real reason behind their success, who was Brahman.

Seeing this, Brahman made himself visible to them. Drunk on their success, they did not recognize Him. ‘What is this strange apparition?’ they wondered. ‘Better send someone to find out if it is friend or foe.’

After a quick discussion, Jatavedas (he was more often called Agni) was picked to be the one to approach the apparition. Agni was powerful and fearless – with his torrid breath, he could turn anything to ashes in a twinkling.

‘All right, then,’ said Agni, and he reached the apparition in a few quick strides.

‘Who are you?’ the apparition asked him. ‘Why, I am Fire,’ said Agni. ‘They call me Jatavedas.’

‘Uh-hunh. And what sort of power do you have?’

‘I can burn up the whole world,’ boasted Agni. ‘Like, everything on earth!’

The apparition said nothing. Instead, it placed a blade of grass in front of Agni, saying, ‘Show me.’

Agni smiled. Mustering up all the firepower at his disposal, he breathed plumes of scorching flame at the challenger. The blade of grass lay there, as fresh and green as before.

Agni returned to the gods, very shaken. But he did not reveal what had happened. ‘I could not find out who that Being is,’ he said shortly, and took his place among the gods.



The gods turned to Wind. ‘Maybe you can find out for us, Wind?’ they said. ‘You are among the strongest of us all.’

Wind smiled. ‘That I am,’ he said and walked jauntily towards the apparition.

‘And who are you?’ said the apparition.

‘Me?’ said Wind, a little put out that the Being did not already know him. ‘I am Matarishvan, the Wind!’

‘I see,’ said the apparition. ‘And what sort of power do you have?’

‘I can carry away the whole world,’ boasted Wind. ‘Like, everything on earth!’

The apparition did not reply. Instead, it placed a blade of grass on the ground, saying, ‘Impress me.’



‘You can’t be serious!’ chuckled Wind. And he huffed at it a little. Nothing happened. He puffed at it some more. Nothing happened. Baffled, Wind loosed upon it a hurricane, with all the power at his command. But the blade of grass remained exactly where it was, not lifting off the ground by so much as a whisper.

Humbled and sore, Matarishvan returned to the gods. But he did not reveal what had happened. ‘I could not find out who that Being is,’ he said curtly, and went away to lick his wounds.

‘Maghavan,’ said the gods to their king, Indra. ‘There’s something strange afoot. You’d better go yourself and find out who or what it is.’

‘Right,’ said Indra, and off he went towards the apparition. But the moment he got close to it, it disappeared. In its place appeared the beautiful Uma, daughter of Himavat, the snow mountain.

‘Fair lady,’ said Indra, ‘I wonder if you know who or what that strange apparition was.’

‘That?’ said Uma. ‘That was Brahman, of course. Did you not recognize him?’ Indra shook his head.

‘Look at you all,’ chided Uma, ‘celebrating Brahman’s victory as your own! Do you not see that all your power and glory comes from Him, and Him alone?’

Instantly, Indra realized the truth of Uma’s words. He returned to the gods, ecstatic, singing Brahman’s praises.

‘Know this, my son,’ continued the teacher, ‘that Agni, Vayu and Indra are considered among the greatest of the gods, for it was they who approached closest to Brahman. Know this – that Indra surpasses the other two, for he was the one to whom the identity of the Being was revealed.’

The student bowed. How cleverly his teacher had comforted him, by letting him know that even the gods did not quite ‘get’ Brahman, that even they did not know Him when they saw Him, without some help from someone wiser than them – in this case, the goddess Uma. A surge of hope filled the student’s heart. If the gods had Uma, he had his teacher to help him!

‘Now join me, if you will,’ said the teacher, ‘in a prayer to the Supreme One.’

‘It would be my pleasure and privilege, sir.’

‘He is the flash of lightning on a moonless night,
He is the twinkle in our eye,
Brahman, we meditate on your glorious light
For You are the I in the I!

Hail dearest One, who drives our mind

And our heart and our spirit and our will,
He who knows You thus will forever find
That he is dear to all; he will!’

‘That was a great story, sir,’ said the student. ‘I know now that I can never hope to approach or recognize Brahman without your help. So teach me, sir! Teach me the Secret! Teach me the Upanishad!’

The teacher placed his hand on the boy’s head, blessing him. Such impatience to learn, such eagerness to uncover the greatest mysteries of the universe! Blessed were the teachers who found students like these.

‘It has already been taught to you, my son,’ he said. ‘This is the Upanishad, this is the great secret about Brahman. Be moderate in your thoughts and actions. Exercise self-restraint. Perform the rituals. Serve self lessly. Live the wisdom of the scriptures. Stay honest to yourself.

‘That is how the demonic in you is slain and the divine nourished. That is how Brahman is attained.’

Aum Shantih Shantih Shantih ||

THE AFTERSTORY

How do you describe someone or something that, by definition, is unperceivable, inconceivable and, well, indescribable? The Upanishads tell us that neither does language have the words nor imagination the pictures to describe the phenomenon we know as Brahman. Nor can our senses grasp Him (not at all surprising, that, considering that our senses are pretty limited; our ears can’t even hear the range of frequencies that dogs can!).

Worse, all the methods we have of classifying something – by type, quality, function or special attribute (in Sanskrit, *jaati-guna-kriya-*

visheshanaih) – fail spectacularly when it comes to describing the One – for He is, again by definition, beyond classification!

Given these insurmountable constraints, the only way to get closer to a ‘profile’ of Brahman is by contradiction – saying two seemingly contradictory things about Him – or by negation – stating what He is not rather than what He is, a technique called *Neti, Neti* – not this, not that. By eliminating all the possibilities that were not true, the sages hoped to take us closer to what was; sort of like what good detectives or doctors do – eliminating possibilities one by one to arrive at the identity of the perpetrator of the crime, or the disease.

The teacher in the Kena does this via statements like ‘To whomsoever It (the Supreme Truth) is not known, to him It is known; to whomsoever It is known, he does not know he knows.’

Wow! That makes it all *crystal* clear. Not!

But never mind that for now.

One good lesson that you *can* take away from all this seeming obfuscation is this – if it is a given that you will not recognize Brahman when you see Him/Her/It, simply because you don’t know what It looks like, wouldn’t it makes sense to treat everyone and everything like you would Brahman? Just to make sure that you don’t miss It when and if It does choose to come into your sights – maybe as the old and frail person standing behind you in a queue, maybe as the hoity-toity aunty honking at you at a traffic light, maybe as one of the 171 trees that the City Corporation has decided to chop to make way for yet another flyover, or maybe as something else altogether?

You bet it does. What does that mean, though – ‘treating everyone like Brahman’? Well, if you knew that someone or something was the One Supreme Power of the universe, without which you could not yourself exist

or live a happy, comfortable, sentient life, how would you treat it? With equal parts respect, gratitude, love and reverence, right? If that Power was in trouble, you would rush to its aid, if It was losing its spirit, you would move heaven and earth to cheer It up, because you knew your very survival depending on It being vibrant and cheerful. In short, you would treat It as you would treat yourself.

And *that's* really what 'seeing' Brahman really means – seeing the power that sustains the universe not just in the sun and the rain and the earth, but in every tree and rock and creature and person around you, and treating them all as you would treat yourself.

Do it!



KATHA

The Upanishad of the Secret of Eternal Life

In which a teenager coolly walks up to Death and has a
long conversation with him



Aum!

May He in the Highest Heaven

Protect both of us, teacher and student;

Nourish both of us together

So that we may work together with great energy,

So that we may learn from each other,

So that our learning is effective,

So that we steer clear of dispute and discord.

Aum Shantih Shantih Shantih ||

THE BACKSTORY

The Katha Upanishad (aka the Kaathaka Upanishad or the Kathopanishad) is one of the most popular, most beloved and most studied Upanishads of all. Part of the Krishna Yajur Veda, its impact has extended well beyond Indian

shores, its philosophy inspiring writers like British poet Edwin Arnold (whose translation of it is called ‘The Secret of Death’), British novelist W. Somerset Maugham (who used a phrase from one of its verses as the title of one of his novels, *The Razor’s Edge*), Irish poet W.B. Yeats and American essayist Ralph Waldo Emerson (whose poem ‘Brahma’ encapsulates the Katha’s philosophy), apart from philosophers like German greats Max Mueller and Arthur Schopenhauer.

The jury is still out on when the Katha was written – while scholars they agree that it was written after the 7th century BCE, they differ about whether it was written before the Buddhist texts (thus influencing them) or after (thus being influenced by them). Be that as it may, there are other, more interesting, things about the Katha, like the wordplay in its name.

The Katha is pronounced KaTHa – with a hard TH, as in the Hindi word *meeTHa* (sweet) – which means ‘distress’ in Sanskrit. This seems apt, as the Upanishad kicks off with the distress of the teenager Nachiketa. But if pronounced Katha, with a soft ‘th’, the word means story, legend or report, all of which apply too, for this Upanishad reports a conversation between the teenager Nachiketa and the god of Death, Yama.

The Katha is composed as two chapters, each with three sections. It narrates the legend of Nachiketa, a boy so steadfast in his pursuit of Moksha that he demanded that the god of Death teach him the secret of eternal life (sounds ironic, but who else but the god of Death would know all about life beyond it, eh?).

It is no wonder then, that today, Nachiketa has become a metaphor for single-mindedness of purpose. Swami Vivekananda, who loved the Kathopanishad, once said that if he could get hold of a dozen boys with the faith and focus of Nachiketa, he could turn ‘the thoughts and pursuits of this country into a new channel’. In fact, even the Swami’s rousing call to the

youth of India – ‘Arise, awake, and stop not until the goal is reached!’ can be traced to a verse in the Katha, which begins with the words ‘uttishtatha jaagrata’ (*‘Arise! Awake!’ – see page 228*).

But enough with the prelude. On to the story!

THE STORY

Once upon a time, the sage Vaajashravas, famous across the land for his generosity, was giving away all that he possessed. His young son, Nachiketa, stood by his side as a good son should, and Vaajashravas was well-pleased.

Nachiketa was well versed in the word of the scriptures and had always had an unshakeable faith in them, just as he had in his father. But as he silently watched the scene, the spirit of the scriptures entered him and nudged that faith awake, turning it from a blind, passive thing that accepted what it was told, into ‘shraddha’ – a faith that believed intensely, but was not afraid to question, analyze and respectfully demand answers. The trusting child was gone, never to return; in his place stood a curious, sceptical young man who saw the hypocrisy of those around him with a sudden clarity.



‘What is my father *doing*?’ thought Nachiketa to himself. ‘These cows he is giving away – old, weak, devoid of milk – what use are they to anyone? This kind of joyless gift is surely not what the scriptures recommend? Surely there is no place in Heaven for the man who gives such gifts as these?’

Convinced that his father hadn’t realized what he was doing, Nachiketa decided to alert him before it was too late.

‘Father,’ he began. Vaajashravas took one look at his son’s face, noticed the change in him and understood what he was about to say. Brusquely, he motioned to Nachiketa to keep silent and went on with his gift-giving.

Nachiketa was stunned. His father knew full well that what he was doing was a hollow, empty thing! But he was pretending that the gifting was more important than the gift, the ritual more worthy than its purpose. This was far worse than he had imagined! Worried that no rewards awaited such a man in the afterlife, the dutiful son came up with a master plan – he would request his father to give *him* away as well. For Nachiketa knew well that he was his father’s dearest possession – if his father gave him away, the gods would

regard it as the ultimate sacrifice, and Vaajashravas would gain all the blessings of Heaven.

‘Sir,’ he said, ‘you are giving away all that is yours. To whom, pray, will you give me?’ His father pretended not to hear. ‘Sir,’ said Nachiketa again, ‘to whom will you give me?’ Vaajashravas did not turn around. ‘Father,’ said Nachiketa for a third time, stubbornly, ‘to whom will you give me?’

Riled, Vaajashravas whirled around. ‘You?’ he yelled. ‘I will give you away to Death! Happy now?’

Nachiketa started as if he had been slapped. But his dismay lasted only a moment. His father had spoken and it was his duty to honour his father’s word.

Vaajashravas, by now ashamed of his outburst, was casting about for ways to make amends when he saw the steely determination in his teenager’s eyes. ‘I did not mean that, Nachiketa, you know I didn’t!’ he begged. ‘Forgive me, lad, don’t leave me!’

‘Father, don’t fret,’ said Nachiketa calmly. ‘Everyone must make this journey some day – you told me so yourself. After all,

I go as the first of many to come,
One among legions that have passed this way;
I go to meet the Lord of Death
To see what plans he has for me today.

A mortal man ripens, on the stalk, like grain;
Like grain, he falls, to be born again.’

And leaving his distraught father behind, Nachiketa walked, straight-backed and purposeful, towards the abode of Death.

Only to find there was no one at home! Death was out, rounding up his next victims, or some such, and Nachiketa was forced to wait on the stoop. For three days and three nights, without a bite to eat or a drink of water, he sat there, uncomplaining, patiently waiting. When Death finally lumbered in on his big, placid water buffalo and saw the young boy sitting there, he was most sincerely apologetic.

How often have I told you, Vaivashvata,
That a guest must never be neglected?
Run now, bring him water and food –
May his curse on our heads be deflected!

I ask pardon, my boy, this is right bad form,
But I will make it up to you, never fear;
You will be compensated for each day you've waited –
Ask for three boons, loud and clear!

‘This isn’t necessary at all, sir, but thank you, I will,’ said Nachiketa, delighted at the unexpected turn of events. No one had told him that Death was so affable. Oh, he would make those boons work for him, and how!

‘For my first boon, sir, I ask that my father’s temper be cooled. I cannot bear the thought of having upset him, so if you could ensure that he is well disposed towards me when I return...?’

‘Not bad,’ thought Death to himself, impressed. ‘Of all the possible things, the boy asks for this!’ Aloud, he said, ‘You may rest assured on that point, my boy. Any father, on seeing his beloved offspring released from the jaws of Death, cannot be anything but ecstatic.’

Nachiketa bowed, his heart brimming with gratitude. ‘Thank you, sir. For

my second boon, then, I request instruction. I have heard that in the place we call Heaven, there is no fear. The reason? You, sir, cannot enter there! There is no old age, either, they tell me, in Heaven, no sickness of mind or body or spirit, only the greatest joy. You, Lord of Death, are the master of the yagna that throws open the doors of Heaven to mortals – teach it to me!’

‘Gladly,’ said Death. And he proceeded to teach Nachiketa the secrets of the great fire sacrifice that leads to Heaven – exactly how to build the altar – how many bricks, their dimensions, the angles at which they were to be laid and so on, what offerings to prepare, which incantations to recite; and all the rest of it. The boy listened intently. When Death had finished, the boy repeated it all back to him, verbatim, not a word missed.

‘What a joy you are to teach, Nachiketa!’ exclaimed the delighted teacher. ‘I’m throwing in a special reward for you – henceforth, this fire sacrifice shall bear your name. That man who has performed the Nachiketa yagna three times; who lives in perfect harmony with three people – father, mother and teacher; who faithfully executes the triple rite – performing the sacrifice, studying the scriptures and giving alms to the needy in the true spirit of giving; he goes beyond death and attains everlasting peace. Such a man shakes off the dread noose and crosses over to realms joyous, never to return!’

Nachiketa bowed, overcome. ‘Thank you, sir.’

‘Now, ask for your third boon!’

Nachiketa hesitated. What he was about to ask for was enormous, audacious, unprecedented. Death, he felt deep in his gut, would resist, and resist mightily. Did he, Nachiketa, have it in him to wrest this boon and also to honour it afterwards? Did he really have the single-mindedness of purpose, the dogged determination, that it would take? Or should he just settle for something more commonplace and easier to fulfil?

‘Stop it!’ he chided himself. ‘Stop second-guessing yourself! Look at the opportunity before you – how many people are privileged enough to get an audience with Death himself? You know this is the question that has plagued you, and humankind, forever. What could be a nobler quest than to learn the answer, so that generations to come may benefit from it? Go on, ask!’

‘For my third boon, Sir,’ said Nachiketa, ‘I would like an answer to the most important question of all.’

‘Ask, boy,’ said Death, indulgent, unsuspecting.

‘When a man dies, sir, there are some people who say “It’s all over now. He’s dead.” There are others who say, with great conviction, “He still lives.” What is the truth, sir? What happens after death?’

Too late, Death realized he had been blindsided. ‘Even the gods are not sure of the answer to that one, Nachiketa,’ he stammered. ‘It’s a very complex thing to grasp. Ask for anything else, my boy. but do not, I beg you, press me for the secret of death!’

‘I believe you,’ returned Nachiketa calmly. ‘But if the answer is as complex as you say it is, where in the world will I find a better teacher than you to explain it to me? I’m afraid I cannot change my wish.’

‘How about,’ said Death eagerly, changing his tack, ‘I make you an offer you can’t refuse?’

Sons and grandsons, noble and true,
Cows and elephants, horses too,
Gold and earth, pretty maidens to woo,
Nachiketa, I will give them all to you.

Do you wish to live through a hundred springs?
Do you crave success, and beautiful things?
Do you covet the pleasures that great wealth brings?

Speak, and I will give your dreams wings!

But ask not about death, I beg of you –
It isn't what well-brought-up teenagers do.'

But Nachiketa was steadfast. 'Oh Lord of Death,' he said, smiling sadly, 'how could I ever find pleasure in life again, however long it be, now that I have gazed upon your face? For as long as I live, O King, you will stalk me like a spectre, your shadow tainting every fleeting breath of worldly happiness. No, sir, it isn't life that interests me any more, but death. Tell me the secret, reveal to me the Great Mystery. I will settle for nothing less.'

Death sighed. This one would not be shaken from his goal. 'Listen, then,' he said.

'Two kinds of action constantly present themselves to us, Nachiketa,' said the Lord of Death. 'One is good action, the other merely pleasant. The first leads to good things – peace, contentment, lasting joy, the welfare of the world; the second leads to pleasure, sure, but selfish pleasure that does no one any good, and does not last.'

'On the surface, there seems not to be much difference between the good and the pleasant, but we must choose wisely, for the choice is entirely ours to make.'

'The wise reflect deeply on the two choices and pick the good, which gives perennial joy, even if that joy should take long to arrive, and involve hard work, many sacrifices and plenty of self-doubt. The ignorant, on the other hand, led only by their senses, greedy for short-term gains and seeking instant gratification, pick the pleasant one every time. Worse, they go around congratulating themselves on the choice they made, believing that *they* are

the wise. “There is only this world, there isn’t any other,” proclaim these foolish men. “When my body dies, I die. So I take only what pleases the body, and enjoy the world to the fullest!” Such men, Nachiketa, are like the blind who are led by the blind. They never escape my coils – they die a hundred deaths as they blunder from life to life.

‘Only a few realize that the body is not the Self, that when the body dies, the Self remains – untainted, unchanging, eternal. It is the rare person who hears the Self speak, and rarer still is the person who recognizes that it is Him who speaks. Wondrous is the person who can teach someone else about Him, and more wondrous is he, who, on finding such a teacher, is able to glean that knowledge.



‘For you can *talk* about Him all you will – debating His nature, arguing about what He is and isn’t; and you can think about Him, and study the scriptures, and listen to all the discourses you like, but you will never *attain* Him via those routes, for He lies beyond the grasp of reason, beyond the reach of the intellect. Find a good teacher, however, and He is easily gained.

‘You, Nachiketa, are among the rarest of the rare. I laid before you every kind of treasure known to man and you rejected them all without a second thought – you chose the good over the pleasant! You have grasped the truth of the Self, dear boy. Blessed is the teacher who has a seeker like you to question him!’*



*Here, as is so many other places, the Upanishads point out how a worthy student is just as rare a species as a worthy teacher. Next time you want to blame your teachers for something, take a moment to reflect on whether you've done your part towards being an ideal student!

Nachiketa bowed. 'What you call "treasure", sir, I know is transient – it comes with a bang but is gone with a whimper. I seek that which is eternal and unchanging, and that can never be gained through something fleeting.'

Yama smiled and nodded. The boy was right, of course. But before he could say anything, Nachiketa spoke again.

'I have heard that there is something beyond right and wrong, past and future, action and inaction. What would you say that is, sir?'

'That, Nachiketa, is the word proclaimed by the Vedas as the holiest of the holy, glorified in every ritual, the supreme syllable that we know as the everlasting spirit Himself – Aum! Dwell on it, son, chant it, let the sacred syllable echo unceasingly in your heart, and you will go beyond sorrow, and all your longings will be fulfilled.'

(The conversation between Yama and Nachiketa ends around here, but the conversation with the reader about death, the body and the Self continues.

On a different note, ever wondered about the meaning of Nachiketa's

name? Here are some theories – ‘Na kshiti’ means ‘that which does not decay’, relevant to that part of the story in which the second boon is granted to him by Yama; ‘Na jiti’ means ‘that which cannot be vanquished’, which applies to the third boon he receives; and ‘Na chiketa,’ which can be translated as ‘I do not know’, is what Nachiketa essentially submits to Yama – ‘Tell me because I do not know’ – while asking him to reveal the greatest secret of all. Now you know.)

DEATH, BE NOT PROUD

*Does a man die at his death, or does he still live? The wise know that the Self within is neither born nor ever dies, has not come from anything and does not go anywhere, and is constant, unchangeable and everlasting. If the slayer imagines that he slays, or if the slain imagines he has been slain, they are both wrong, for the Self who lives inside neither slays nor is ever slain.**

**Sounds familiar? It would, if you had read the Bhagavad Gita – this is one of the first arguments that Krishna presents to Arjuna, while trying to convince him to do his duty as a warrior and a king, even if it means killing his closest family. ‘You see, you can’t really kill the Self in them,’ says Krishna, ‘you only kill their bodies, which are meant to die one day anyway.’ Krishna thinks it’s a pretty persuasive argument. Arjuna, quite understandably, doesn’t. So Krishna is forced to give him the long lecture we know today as the Gita.*

Smaller than the smallest, vaster than the vastest, the Self lives within the heart. Stop striving in vain – submit instead to His will, embrace with equanimity everything that comes your way, sacrifice your anxiety about the outcome of your work. Thus will your mind be tranquil, thus will you behold His glory in yourself.

For He is closer to you than you know but farther away than you can imagine. Sitting still, He moves everything; lying down, He goes everywhere. And though He abides in everyone, He only reveals Himself to a few.

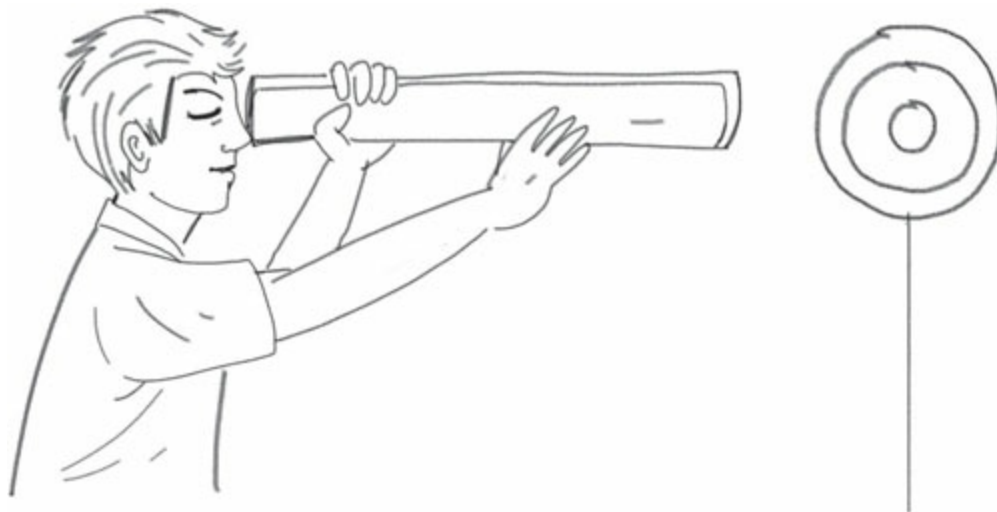
The unrighteous cannot reach Him, nor they whose minds are not

composed. The man who controls not his senses cannot know Him, nor he who gives not a thing his complete dedication.

He who consumes both priest and king like a dish of boiled rice and gobbles up death itself like the curry on top, who can truly know where to find Him, until He decides to reveal Himself?

What are the main messages in this passage? One, of course, is clearly stated – the death we talk about is only the death of the body, not the soul, which is our one true Self.

But there seems to be another big message here as well: no matter how hard you work towards something, how sincerely, or how single-mindedly, it is impossible to achieve what you set out to, or scale the pinnacle of your particular mountain, unless your effort is also touched by divine grace. Or, as the Kathopanishad puts it, unless ‘He decides to reveal Himself’.



That is one way to explain, say, why certain sportspersons are consistently at the top of their game even though others practise just as hard, or why certain musicians are more popular than others who are just as

focused, or why someone else got elected school prefect when you are just as responsible a leader as she is – the former simply have that something ‘extra’. You can call it luck if you wish, or find a dozen rational-sounding reasons for their success; the Kathopanishad itself attributes it to Him deciding to reveal Himself.

Unfortunately, there is no formula for ensuring that He reveals Himself to you – bummer! – but here’s what you can and must do. Simply continue to put in your very best effort, because showing that you are worthy – by doing the hard work and making the sacrifices required – is the very first step to becoming a Chosen One. For it’s only when someone’s effort – even if that someone is a genius – combines with divine grace, that success – both in this world and the next – is guaranteed.

One more thing – while you are putting in that effort, quit looking over your shoulder to see when your turn to be the Chosen One will come. Oh, and stop hating on those who seem to have been picked over you – that kind of thing distracts you from your own effort. Instead, focus entirely on your effort and enjoy it for its own sake. This last is vital, say the scriptures – letting go of expectation is the key to a happy life!

THE RIDER IN THE CHARIOT

In the chariot of the body rides the Master, the Self.

Who’s the driver? Buddhi, the Intellect!

The reins? Manah, the Mind!

The horses? Why, the five senses!

The paths they wish to traverse? Selfish desires!

O charioteer, hold firm the reins and control your skittish horses,
which pull in every direction! O Intellect, understanding that worldly

desires lead only to sorrow, train the Mind to be one-pointed, and draw the senses to yourself!

For he whose intellect is not discriminating and whose mind is not still, he stumbles along winding paths that lead from death to death. But he whose charioteer is illuminated by understanding, he sticks to the one true path to his destination, the abode of the Supreme, never to return.

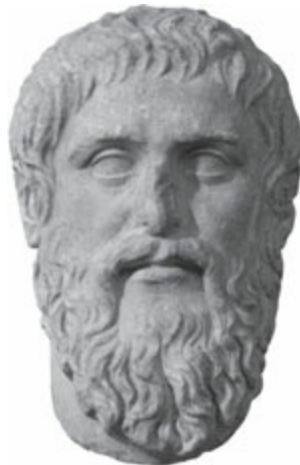
Using a chariot as an allegory to talk about the importance of controlling the wild horses of the mind and the senses is not unique to Indian thought. The 4th century BCE Greek philosopher Plato, student of Socrates and teacher of Aristotle, also uses the chariot allegory in one of his dialogues, *Phaedrus*. Socrates tells *Phaedrus* that the human soul is a chariot pulled by two winged horses, with Reason as the charioteer. One of the horses is white, and of noble breed and character, the other is black, and quite the opposite, which necessarily makes driving the chariot a very difficult proposition.

In Plato's story, the white horse represents good passions (like being passionate about confronting and fighting injustice, seeking the truth, and so on), while the black one represents more pedestrian and not-so-noble passions – wealth, fame, success.

Those souls who are fully enlightened know for certain that a realm exists beyond what the senses can see, and aim for it single-mindedly – they let the white horse lead them there. Others are not so sure – they bob up occasionally into the other realm, catching a glimpse of what exists beyond the material world, but without that unshakeable faith, or *shraddha*, which *Nachiketa* had to guide them, they forget what they have seen and let the black horse bring them crashing down to earth.

Depending on how much of the other realm a soul has seen in one

lifetime, Socrates tells Phaedrus, it gets reincarnated into one of nine categories of people (see list on following page) in its next. Those who have seen the most (the almost-enlightened) will come back as No. 1 on the list – philosophers – while those who have seen the least (the grossly unenlightened) are likely to come back as No. 9. Everyone else fits somewhere in between. (Given how you have behaved in your life so far, what do you think you will be reborn as? More importantly, which category of people would you like to be reborn into? From his list, it is clear that Plato did not believe that even the most terrible people would be reborn as cockroaches; according to Hindu philosophy, however, this is a very real possibility. Eeeeeeeps!)



A sculpture of Greek philosopher Plato

On to the list now!

- (1) **Philosophers** (devious, that, considering Plato himself was a philosopher; but the category basically includes learned men, whose nature makes them delight in the pleasures of the mind. Yup, exactly how brahmins are defined in the Gita);
- (2) Law-abiding **kings and leaders** (essentially, men of action, or kshatriyas);
- (3) **Politicians and businessmen** (vaishyas, among others – although if Plato came back to live in the 21st century, he might want to reconsider this category's position in the list);
- (4) **Doctors and healers** (so low down on the list? Unfair much?);
- (5) **Prophets, diviners, alchemists** and assorted mystics;
- (6) **Poets and artists** (at number six? Seriously? Seriously. Plato did not care for poetry and art, dismissing both as imitative; they were either copied from nature, he said, or were pure fantasy – Greek poetry then was mostly about the gods – and therefore inauthentic, unoriginal and fake);
- (7) **Craftsmen** (people who got their hands dirty, i.e., shudras);
- (8) **Sophists** (who were also philosophers, but who, according to Plato and his friends at least, were the worst kind of frauds, only imparting philosophical truths to those who could pay for them, and coming up with all kinds of flawed reasoning to support their specious arguments); and
- (9) **Tyrants** (enough said!)

But enough about Plato. Let's talk now about the Bhagavad Gita, which borrows so heavily from this section of the Katha. Apart from the argument about the slayer and the slain, Krishna also uses the chariot allegory to instruct Arjuna on who or what his Self really is. The fact that their conversation happened in a chariot, where he, the Lord of Wisdom, was Arjuna's charioteer, is not a random coincidence at all! Also, by choosing Krishna as his charioteer, Arjuna had declared, loud and clear, his shraddha

to the highest goal. Later, Krishna would choose to reveal Himself to Arjuna, thus blessing his effort with the elusive divine grace. You see how, with all this on his side, Arjuna could not but win – not just the earthly war he was fighting with the Kauravas but also the bigger war he was fighting with himself?

ARISE! AWAKE! YOU'RE TREADING THE RAZOR'S EDGE!

Uttishtatha jaagrata praapya varaan nibodhata
Kshoorasya dhaara nishita duratyaya; durgam pathas tat kavayo
vadanti

Get up! Wake up! Pay attention
To all the blessings you've received!
Sharp as the razor's edge is the path, they say,
More arduous than can be conceived!

To believe implicitly in a world that you cannot experience with your senses, to choose always the good path over the pleasurable, to be so dedicated to your quest that no earthly temptation can divert you, even while everyone around you mocks at your 'idealistic nonsense' – all of it demands a rare brand of courage.

What does that kind of courage translate to in the real world? Not paying a bribe to get something done, perhaps, even though you know it will delay things for you, and require you to make many trips to do it; or skipping a friend's impromptu party because you have already promised your granddad you will play chess with him; or taking issue with your mom, respectfully, when you believe she is not treating the domestic help right; or picking up the litter on your street each Sunday, even though your neighbours never step in to help (in fact, they don't even stop throwing stuff out of respect for your

efforts; instead, they hasten to discourage you, assuring you that you are wasting your time and should be studying instead).

Do you see how displaying this kind of courage will eventually make you a better person, in your own estimation if not in anyone else's? Sure. But is it something that you'd rather avoid? Oh, most certainly! See how the sages were so on point when they declared that the path to self-realization was as sharp as a razor's edge?

ETAD VAI TAT – THIS, INDEED, IS THAT!

All the body's 'gates' – eyes, nose, ears, mouth – He in his wisdom turned outwards; therefore, willy-nilly, we look outside us for our happiness. But the wise sage looked inside himself, and beheld the Self within.

When we can only perceive what lies outside,
Using all our tools of perception.
That which is left behind, which nestles inside –
This, indeed, is That!

He who rose from the primordial ocean
And abides in the cave of the heart,
And of every creature is the driving notion –
This, indeed, is That!

Divine mother, who sustains each breath,
Aditi, the boundless one
Who dwells in our hearts and keeps us from death –
This, indeed, is That!

Concealed in kindling is the eternal spark
(Hidden like a life in the womb)
Of Agni the Glorious, who puts out the dark –
This, indeed, is That!

With its roots in Heaven and its branches on earth
Stands the upside-down world-tree,
Immortal source of our sustenance, our worth –
This, indeed, is That!

They speak of a city with eleven gates,
And of Him, its watchful guardian;
He guides us across sorrow's straits –
This, indeed, is That!

The thumb-sized Being enshrined in the heart
Like a flame smokeless and eternal
Lord of time, of every creature a part –
This, indeed, is That!

When death comes to the body, and the Self breaks free
And vanishes quicker than eye can see,
What remains is the Word that holds the key –
This, indeed, is That!

How do we describe something we cannot perceive? And what is the Self? Here's how the sages of the Kathopanishad did it – they declared that the Self was no different from Hiranyagarbha the Creator, Aditi, the divine mother, Agni, the eternal fire, the upside-down Ashvattha tree*, or the 'guardian of the city with eleven gates'.** In fact, said the sages, the 'thumb-sized being

that is enshrined in the heart’*** was no different at all from the Universal Soul – the Supreme Spirit that is all around us and deep inside us, enveloping the universe and extending beyond it (vaster than the vastest), while at the same time sitting snug as a bug inside every atom of creation (smaller than the smallest).

And to hammer their point home, the sages employed a rousing refrain – Etad vai tat! – **This** (the Self), **indeed, is That** (Hiranyagarbha, Aditi, Agni, the upside-down tree, the guardian of the fort with eleven gates, the Universal Soul)!

*The story of the ‘world-tree’ that connects Heaven and earth is found in many cultures. Most stories about these ‘connectors’ place them at a mythical location called the Axis Mundi (centre of the world), which is believed to be the spot at which the four cardinal directions meet. While most stories have it that it is through such connectors that prayers go up to the gods and blessings descend to our world, the Indian conception of it is a little different.

Our tree is an upside-down one, with its roots in Heaven and its branches on the earth. But so thick do this tree’s branches grow on the ground that we are deluded into believing that the branches are the forest, that it is the earth, and not Heaven, that sustains the tree. Instead of seeking the great trunk rising to the sky, we begin to chase after the low-hanging fruit on earth, believing foolishly that this is all there is.

In the Bhagavad Gita, Krishna tells Arjuna this story and exhorts him to hew down the dense forest of delusion using the sharp axe of detachment, so that the truth stands revealed. Another example of the influence of the Upanishadic stories on the Gita!



**The ‘city with the eleven (or nine) gates’ is a common metaphor for the body in Indian philosophy and storytelling. The nine gates of the body are the nine ‘openings’, all of which face outwards – the two eyes, the two nostrils, the two ears, the mouth, and the two openings down under

through which stuff is discharged (women have three, of course, but the sages were, as usual, not thinking of them when they wrote this). Sometimes, eleven gates are mentioned – the two extra ones are the navel and what is called the ‘brahmarandhra’ (Brahma’s passage), the opening at the top of the skull which closes up as a baby grows. Hindus believe that it is through the brahmarandhra that the life-force, or Brahman, enters the foetus, and it is through it again that the soul leaves once the body dies.

***The Self, or Atman, is often sweetly described as the ‘thumb-sized Being’. Perhaps the sages reckoned that if the Self had to reside in the heart, it should logically be of a size that fits in it. Metaphysics was all very well, but sometimes things had to be anatomically correct too, what? Unlike with some other religions, Hinduism has never been in conflict with science, considering scientific theories as just one more way of looking at the world, so this isn’t such an outlandish theory.

BACK TO NACHIKETA

Did you think it was a bit odd that Nachiketa dropped off in the middle of the Upanishad? Never fear, he returns triumphantly, right after the bit about *Etad vai tat*, to conclude the Upanishad.

Thus did Nachiketa, having gained this knowledge from Death himself, conquer death and gain everlasting life. And so may every other who realizes this truth, and knows his inner Self thus, be free.

Aum Shantih Shantih Shantih ||

THE AFTERSTORY

It’s interesting to note that the main protagonist in the Kathopanishad is not a wise sage or one of the gods, but a teenager. Could it be that the composer of the Katha, having taught a bunch of teenagers himself, or perhaps having raised a couple of his own, realized that none but a teenager would be as disgusted at a beloved parent’s hypocrisy as Nachiketa was? Or be so determined to establish his own identity that he would undertake as risky and unprecedented an adventure as a visit to the abode of Death? Or have the sheer chutzpah, when he got there, to ask Death so many difficult questions, confident that he would eventually be returned to the world of the living?

It is a likely theory. And whether true or not, it holds a lesson for all teens

and almost-teens – Be like Nachiketa. Ask the difficult questions. Shake up complacency. Question tradition. Challenge authority respectfully. Undertake rigorous journeys – sticking to a tough exercise routine, going at calculus until you've cracked it, training for a half-marathon, learning a new language. Bring fresh eyes and minds and perspectives to existing social structures and practices, and back it up with the hard work and the sacrifices needed to pull them down or make them better.

It's in your young, powerful hands to fulfil your potential and make the world a better, fairer, kinder place. Go for it!



PRASHNA

The Upanishad of the Peepul Tree Sage

In which six questions go in search of a teacher



Aum!

Ye gods, bless us

That we may hear words that are pleasant

And see things that are blessed,

That we may live our lives in ways that nourish you.

O great Indra, O All-Knowing Poosha,

O Garuda, destroyer of evil, O great teacher Brihaspati,

Take care of us, blessed ones!

Aum Shaantih Shaantih Shaantih ||

THE BACKSTORY

Once upon a time, there was a great war between the Devas and the Asuras. Vritra, the fearsome serpent demon whose favourite pastime was to block rivers and cause drought on earth, was in the ascendant, and Indra and his Devas were routed. As was usual, Indra ran to Vishnu for help, for Vritra had sucked up all of the earth's water and humans were dying like flies. 'There is only one weapon, Vajra the thunderbolt, that is powerful

enough to destroy Vritra,’ said Vishnu. ‘Unfortunately, it must be fashioned out of the bones of the sage Dadhichi.’

Never one to be cowed by awkward tasks, even when they involved asking someone to consider giving up his life so that he, Indra, may win back his kingdom, Indra went straight to Dadhichi (who, by the by, was the son of sage Atharvan, the composer of the Atharva Veda). The selfless sage agreed to his request immediately, becoming the ultimate poster boy for the Big Idea that no individual sacrifice is too great when it comes to protecting the good against the forces of evil. In the war that followed, the Vajra, which would go on to become Indra’s signature weapon, crushed Vritra and his hordes, returning peace and joy to the three worlds.*

*This particular story is one that India, and especially the Indian Armed Forces, has taken deeply to heart. The Param Vir Chakra, India’s highest gallantry award, features the four-lion capital surrounded by four replicas of – hold your breath – Indra’s Vajra, equating the sacrifice of the medal winner (the PVC has almost always been awarded posthumously) with Dadhichi’s own. Here’s another bit of cool trivia - the medal was designed not by an Indian but by Hungarian-Russian designer Yvonne Maday de Maros, who ran away to India as a nineteen-year-old to marry army officer Vikram Khanolkar. She fell so in love with India that she changed her name to Savitri Bai Khanolkar, became an Indian citizen and eventually ended up designing not just the PVC but also the other medals for gallantry – the Maha Vir Chakra, the Vir Chakra and the Ashoka Chakra. After her husband’s retirement and death, Savitri Bai became a nun at the Ramakrishna Mission, where she remained until her own death in 1990. Now you know.



Now, while making the snap decision to donate his bones, Dadhichi had overlooked one tiny detail – he hadn't bothered to inform his pregnant wife Swarcha of this. When Swarcha found out that her husband was dead, she was so distraught that she committed suicide, but not before she had – the following content may be disturbing to young audiences – ripped open her womb with a rock and deposited the foetus under a peepul tree. Her sister-in-law, i.e., Dadhichi's sister, Dudhimati, took charge of the infant and

nourished him on a steady diet of peepul leaves and the life-giving amrit that the moon had kindly thought to drop off. The boy, who Dudhimati named Pippalada after the peepul tree under which his mother had left him, grew up to become one of ancient India's most revered sages.

And we are telling this story because? Because it was this very Pippalada (he of the severely traumatic childhood) who is – ta-daa! – immortalized in the Prashna Upanishad!

The Prashna Upanishad – also known as the Prashnopanishad – is part of the Atharva Veda. It was most likely composed after 400 BCE, which makes it 'newer' than, say, the Kena and the Katha.

Prashna, as every child who has ever written a Hindi or Sanskrit exam knows, means question, and the Prashnopanishad is a straight-forward account of six questions that were asked to the sage Pippalada, and his answers to them (which is why this Upanishad is sometimes also called the Shat Prashna – or Six- Question – Upanishad).

The six questions address a wide range of concerns, from the universal – How did life begin? – to the specific – What are the functions of the five breaths in the body (yup, according to the Upanishads there are five, not one; tell that to your biology teacher!)? When I am asleep, who watches my dreams (never thought about that – good question!)?

Here is a quick look at the six questions, and Pippalada's responses.

THE STORY

Once, in days long past, six men – called Sukesha, Satyakama, Gargya, Kausalya, Bhargava and Kabandhi – who were all true seekers of Brahman and had spent most of their lives engaged in austerities and contemplation, decided to visit the great sage Pippalada. They had all, you see, reached a plateau in their spiritual enquiry, and try as they might, were unable to

progress to the next level. Realizing that they needed a guru to answer the questions that plagued them, they went to meet Pippalada, carrying fuel for sacrifice, as it was customary for students to do.*

*Whenever students went to start instruction with a teacher, the practice was to take with them a load of firewood, which would be used as fuel in the sacrifices the teacher performed at the gurukul. Metaphorically speaking, however, the firewood symbolized the student's commitment to the sacrifices that would be demanded of him in the long, hard and lonely path to knowledge.



Pippalada welcomed them warmly. Then he said, 'Live with me for a year as my students do, practising self-restraint, chastity and faith. At the end of the year, you can ask me your questions, and if I know the answers, I shall most certainly share them with you.'

So the six men lived with Pippalada for a year, doing all the jobs that novice students did. At the end of the year, they approached him again, and Kabandhi asked his question.

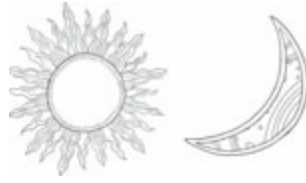


Prashna 1: Where did all the creatures in the world come from?

'Bhagavan*,' said Kabandhi, 'where, truly, do all the creatures in the world come from? Where, indeed, do they take their birth?'

And Pippalada answered: 'Prajapati, being the Lord of All Creatures, had a desire for creatures, quite naturally. Once, he did great penances, and from the heat generated inside him, produced a pair of twins – rayi (matter), which was female, and prana (energy), which was male – thinking, 'Now these two will go forth and multiply, producing all manner of creatures for me to

enjoy.’ And they did.



‘What is rayi or matter? Everything that has a form is rayi, and so also are things that are formless, like the mind. But matter remains just that – matter – until it is infused with prana, energy. The moon is simply matter, but the sun is prana**, for it is only when the sun rises and illumines the whole world – east and west, north and south – that everything comes alive. It is only when he throws his light on the moon that she comes alive. Verily, Kabandhi, the sun is both the prana of the universe, and Vaishvanara, the spark of life in every creature.

* Say bhaga-vuhn.

**Similarly, the night, when everything is asleep (read: dead) is considered rayi, while the day, when everything is vibrantly alive, is prana. Neither rayi nor prana is complete without the other. It is only when the two – rayi and prana, matter and energy, female and male – come together and become one that life can result.

‘In the cycle of a man’s life, there are two paths available to him – the northern and the southern. Those men who perform rituals and do acts of charity for selfish ends, not recognizing the essence, the prana, in those rituals, are bogged down by rayi, and they take the southern route; they return to the material world, the world of rayi, again and again. But those who seek true knowledge, practising chastity and self-restraint, keeping the faith, they, dear Kabandhi, soar with prana along the northern route, and gain the realms of the fearless, radiant sun, eternal source of all lifebreaths, never to return.’



Prashna 2: Of all the different powers that define an intelligent, engaged living being, which one is the most important?

Then Bhargava asked his question.

‘Bhagavan,’ said Bhargava, ‘who are the gods that support life in the body? Which of them make a being “alive” to everything around itself? And which among them is the greatest?’

And Pippalada answered: ‘The five elements, dear Bhargava – space, earth, fire, water, air – of which the body is made, these are the gods that support the body. But speech and mind, sight and hearing – they are the gods that light up the inanimate body, turning it into a self-aware, intelligent being that can engage with the world around itself.

‘Let me tell you a story about these four gods, As they appeared in the body, one by one, each boasted, “I, and only I, am what truly sustains and supports the body.”’

‘Only after they had all spoken did Prana the lifebreath show himself. “Do not delude yourselves,” he said. “Without me – call me energy, lifebreath, what you will – who is present in the body as five distinct breaths, the body would not survive.”

“Ha!” mocked speech and mind, sight and hearing. “Show us!”

“I will,” said Prana, and he made as if to leave, proceeding swiftly upwards towards the brahmarandhra, the passage at the top of the human head through which life enters and leaves a body. And the gods that light up the body, all four of them, found themselves being pulled upwards and out, willy-nilly, in Prana’s wake, just like bees are “pulled” behind the queen bee when she leaves the hive.

“Mercy!” cried the gods. “We believe you now. When Prana leaves, so do all the other faculties – none can exist without the lifebreath!”**

*This is clear enough, but just to reiterate – when breath leaves a body, so do thought, speech, and the

faculties of seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting and feeling. The vital being that existed before – talking, laughing, enjoying a beautiful sunset or a dish of pani puri – is gone. What remains is simply matter, raji, a body made up of the five elements.



Prashna 3: **Now, about this lifebreath – where is it itself born?**

Then Kausalya asked his question, nay, questions.

‘Bhagavan,’ said Kausalya, ‘whence does prana come? How does it enter the body? Once inside, how does it divide itself into the five breaths? How does it leave the body? How does it support life, both inside and outside the body?’

‘That’s too many questions,’ smiled Pippalada, ‘but since I know you as a true seeker, Kausalya, I will answer them.

‘Prana comes from the Self, it is an integral part of the Self. Just as a man and his shadow are inseparable, so indeed are the Self and prana inseparable. Both enter the body together, through a path created by the mind. For the mind remembers unfulfilled desires from previous lives, and needs prana to bring alive a new body so that those desires may be fulfilled in this life.

‘Once inside, prana splits, creating four other breaths to take charge of specific tasks in the body, just as a king appoints officers to carry out specific duties. The main breath, Prana, dwells in the eye and ear, mouth and nose – it is the lifebreath, which allows us to see and hear, smell and taste, think and talk. Apana (say apaa-na) is the downward breath, pressing down on the organs of excretion and reproduction, so that they may work as they are meant to. In the middle of the body is Samana (say samaa-na), the breath that stabilizes, working the bellows that keep the fire of digestion burning steadily and well.

‘Vyana (say vyaa-na), the breath that travels, is the distributor of energy,

carrying it along a network of 101 channels that lead from the heart, where the Self dwells, and so along the hundred smaller channels that each branches into, and thus along the thousands more channels that each of those cleaves into, to take the sustaining, nourishing energy that Samana helps create from food, into the remotest reaches of the body.

‘Rising straight up through one of these channels, the one that leads from the heart to the head, is Udana (say udaa-na), the upward breath, which manifests at the time of death to convey the lifebreath out of the body to whatever worlds a man has gained through his actions. Those who have done good work in this life go to good realms, those who did evil, evil realms. Those who did a bit of both come back to the human realm. Know this, Udana also appears in dreamless sleep or deep meditation, when the senses have been withdrawn, to convey the mind to Brahman.

‘This is the way, dear Kausalya, that prana supports life inside the body.

‘Outside the body, the sun, which, when it rises, awakens the prana in every eye, is the Prana of the universe. Earth, which pulls everything towards itself, is indeed Apana, the downward force. Space, the element that dwells in the middle region, between earth and sky, is Samana, the stabilizer. Air, the wind that moves within this space, travelling through it, around it, and into every nook and cranny, is Vyana the distributor. And what of Udana? Fire is verily Udana, for it is an upward force, always reaching for higher realms.*

*Isn't it fascinating how the Upanishadic sages always connected the happenings in the individual body to the happenings in the universe, and vice versa? You are the universe, they are saying at every step, and the universe is you. If you believe that the universe's actions can impact you, they declare, know that your actions can equally impact the universe. Therefore, be very careful, very mindful about what you do, for you have the power to shake up the world, in ways both bad and good.

‘When the fire of life is extinguished, the mind draws the senses back into itself. Then, together with Prana, and aided by Udana, it readies for rebirth (if that was its desire at the time of death) or to move to higher realms (if that

was its last thought).

‘The wise who know prana thus, Kausalya – how it is born, how it enters the body, where its five different manifestations live, both in the body and outside it, and how it is related to the individual Self, Atman, and the Supreme Self, Brahman – they become immortal, yea, they become immortal.’

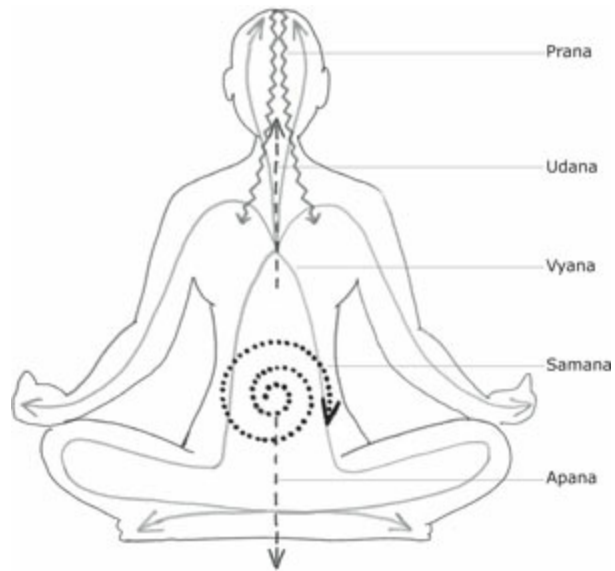


Prashna 4: When I am sleeping, who in heck is the guy watching and enjoying my dreams?

Then Gargya asked his question.

‘Bhagavan,’ said Gargya, ‘when a man sleeps, who is it that really sleeps within him? When he is awake, who is he that is awake within him? Who is it, truly, that sees his dreams? Who enjoys himself when a man is happy?’

And Pippalada answered, ‘Just as, at the end of day, the sun gathers all his rays into his golden disc, only to send them out into the world again the next morning, and the next, and the next, so, Gargya, does the mind, the highest deity in the body, gather all up into itself when a man sleeps. In that state, therefore, a man sees not, hears not, tastes not, smells not, feels not, eats not, emits not, enjoys not and moves not. That’s when we say, “He is sleeping”.



‘Only the fires of life – Prana, which is the very breath of life; Apana, which smoulders, constant and true, like the fire in a householder’s hearth; Samana, which balances a man’s in-breath and out-breath; and Vyana, which diffuses energy through the body – burn in the sleeping city.

‘And with these fires, the yagna of life continues inside the sleeping body. The mind, which is the yajamana, the performer, of this yagna, pours into the sacred fire the offerings of the in-breath and out-breath. The fruit of this night-long sacrifice, the reward for the yajamana, is the fifth breath, Udana, which arises in deep, dreamless sleep, and leads the mind to Brahman.

‘In the dream state, when the senses have been gathered up in sleep, the mind is supreme. He sees again things that have been seen, hears again things that have been heard, and experiences again things that have been experienced in the waking state. Things seen and unseen, heard and unheard, lived through and not lived through, existent and non-existent, the mind sees all, the mind sees all.*

*How can the mind see things that are unseen, hear things that are unheard and enjoy what it has not enjoyed in real life? In the dream state, when the mind is not accountable to the senses, which insist that the only reality is what can be seen, heard and felt, it sets free imagination and truly enjoys itself,

constructing all manner of unlived fantasies that are only vaguely related to lived experiences. All of us who have had recurring nightmares of being on a cliff that crumbles suddenly under our feet, or of being chased by a tiger, or found ourselves in any weird, that-can-never-happen-in-real-life dream situations, know first-hand of the truly elaborate fantasies the mind is capable of conjuring up!

‘By and by, the warmth of dreamless sleep irradiates the body. The mind is finally stilled, and the body finds itself at last in the bliss of true repose. Just as birds wing their way back to the tree when they are weary, everything in the body returns to its true resting place, the Self.

‘In dreamless sleep, earth, water, fire, air and space, eyes and ears, sight and sound, nose and palate, smell and taste, skin and touch, tongue and speech, hands and feet, things that are held and paths that are walked, things excreted and that which excretes, things emitted and that which emits, mind and intellect, imagination and reason, self-awareness and ego, belief and understanding, light and life, things that are illuminated, rayi, and things that the breath, prana, brings alive – all of them, all of them, find their repose in the Self.

‘It is He, Gargya, this Self in which everything reposes, that is truly the seer, the hearer, the smeller, the feeler, the taster, the doer, the perceiver, the knower, the thinker, the experiencer, the Person in the body. And this Person himself reposes in the higher self – the immortal, imperishable, Supreme Self that is Brahman.

‘He who knows the Self in the body – the formless, stainless, shadowless Self on which rest the five elements, the vital breaths and the various intelligences – as the constant, shining, imperishable, Supreme Self – such a one, dear Gargya, knowing the whole truth, becomes the truth.’



Prashna 5: Is that very difficult thing called meditation even worth the

effort?

Then Satyakama asked his question.

‘Bhagavan,’ said Satyakama, ‘if a man were to meditate on the sacred syllable Aum for his whole life, what rewards would he win through that meditation?’

And Pippalada answered, ‘That sound Aum (say Om*), Satyakama, is verily Brahman, both the higher one (Supreme universal spirit) and the lower one (the Self in every individual). Only by contemplating deeply on Aum, without distraction, may a man reach either.

*In Sanskrit, when the vowel sound ‘aa’ is followed by the vowel sound ‘uu’, the resulting sound is not ‘aaau’ or ‘ow’, but ‘oh’. A+u+m, therefore, is not Aaum or Owm, but Ohm.

‘Even a man who only meditates on the first sound, A, wins rewards. He comes quickly back to earth after death, led by the verses of the Rig Veda, blessed with the qualities of austerity, chastity and faith, to lead a full and happy life in the world of men.

‘A man who meditates on the first two sounds, A and U, is conveyed after his death to intermediate worlds, ruled by the moon, by the rituals of the Yajur Veda. There he enjoys a glorious life until the fruits of his Karma are depleted, after which he returns to earth again.

‘But he who meditates on all three sounds of Aum – A, U and M – he is escorted after death to the abode of the sun by the melodious chants of the Sama Veda, where he becomes one with the light, never to return.

‘These three sounds – A, U and M – if meditated upon separately, dear Satyakama, cannot lead a man beyond death. Wise is the sage who meditates on all of them as one, letting the sound of ‘Aum’ resonate in his heart without pause as he goes about his work both in the outer world and the inner, for he is freed forever from fear. He crosses beyond old age and death, and attains that which is serene, that which is luminous, and that which is peace

everlasting.’



Prashna 6: Help! A seeker asked me about the person with sixteen parts – and I had no idea what he meant!

Then Sukesha approached Pippalada and asked his question.

‘Bhagavan,’ said Sukesha, ‘Hiranyanabha, the prince of Kosala, once came to me and said: “Sukesha, do you know the person with the sixteen parts?” I did not, so I told him so. He did not say a word as he got back onto his chariot and departed. Now tell me, sir, who is this person of the sixteen parts?’

And Pippalada answered, ‘Right here, Sukesha, within your body and mine, is the Person from whom, in whom, the sixteen parts are born. This Person, the Self, thought to himself, “There must be something that comes into the body when I do, filling it with life, and leaves when I leave, withdrawing life. I must create such a thing.”

And so he created (1) Prana, the lifebreath. From the lifebreath came (2) faith or shraddha, and from faith came (3) earth, (4) water, (5) fire, (6) space, (7) air, (8) the senses, (9) the mind, and (10) food, for everything needs fuel to grow and move. From food came (11) energy, from energy (12) the penances we undertake, (13) the hymns we chant, (14) the actions we do, (15) the worlds we do and do not inhabit, and (16) the names of everything in these worlds, for it is only once a thing has been named that it can stand apart from the others.

‘But just as rivers entering the ocean from every side lose their individual names and forms and become, simply, the ocean, so does the separateness of the sixteen parts of a person disappear and become, simply, the Person, no sooner than the Self is known. That one, the Person, is beyond name and

form, immortal.

‘Know the Person, dear Sukesha, as the one by whom, in whom, the sixteen parts are held together, just as spokes are held together in the hub of a wheel, and you will see beyond name and form, and go beyond death.’



Then, to the six seekers, the sage Pippalada said, ‘That is all I know about that Supreme Brahman, higher than whom there is nothing else.’

And the students bowed to their teacher, and sang his praises, saying, ‘You, indeed, are our father, who has taken us across the sea of ignorance to the other shore.’

Praise the supreme seers! Homage to the supreme rishis!

Aum Shantih Shantih Shantih ||

THE AFTERSTORY

Afterstory 1: The Upanishadic Classroom

Remember how Pippalada didn’t immediately answer the six seekers’ questions? Instead, he asked them to live with him as his students for a year, serving him exactly as his other, much younger and much less enlightened, students did, despite the fact that these men had been on the spiritual path for several years, meditating, practising austerities, and all the rest of it.

Pippalada’s little throwaway line in the Prashna Upanishad – ‘Live with me as my students for a year, and then we can talk’ – tells us that what Indians believe to be among the most important attributes in a student are:

- **Humility** – In response to Pippalada’s suggestion, those men could well have retorted – ‘You can’t be serious!’ or ‘Do you know who my dad is?’

(for they were all sons of renowned sages), but they didn't.

- **Patience** – There are no shortcuts to mastering a subject, a sport, a craft. If you really want to master something, patience is vital. Bet those poor men never expected that they would be required to wait a whole year simply to be allowed to speak to Pippalada! But they never complained, and were rewarded.
- **Commitment and Discipline** – If you truly want to go after a dream, you must be prepared to commit all to it. By asking the seekers to stay with him for a year, Pippalada was not only testing their commitment to the pursuit of truth, but also buying himself the opportunity of observing them up close, over an extended period, to see if they had the discipline and perseverance such a quest required. When he found that they were worthy, he shared everything he knew with them.
- **Faith** – Unless they truly believed in the teacher, and trusted that his injunction came from a place of wisdom and love, the six men would have never accepted to do as he said. Shraddha – both in the teacher and the cause – is a very important requirement for all kinds of quests.

The other thing we can deduce from the description of Pippalada's classroom is that the ancient Indian style of teaching was an interactive one as against a lecture-based one. Also, it was clearly led by the student – unless the student took the trouble to think deeply about a subject himself and formulate a question that he truly wanted answered, the teacher did not speak.

You know through your own experience how important self-learning is – when you are truly interested in learning something, like, say, a game hack, you will display severe commitment, scouring the Internet yourself for hours, reading and trying out all the tutorials online, and then, finally, when you have almost got it, except for one small technicality, you will stop using random keywords in your search and instead, formulate your question using

Very Specific Keywords, which – bingo! – will pull up the exact web page you needed. That kind of learning is exactly what the Upanishads recommend!

Unfortunately for both teachers and students, the world of education today seems to be largely focused on ‘finishing the portions’ and getting top grades rather than on true understanding. Sigh.

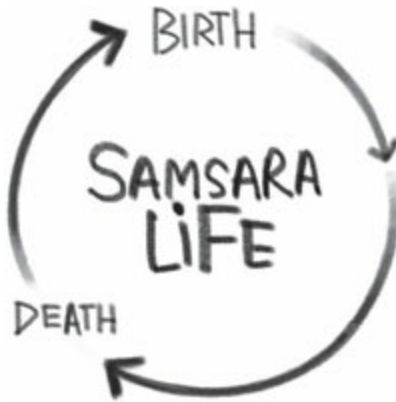


Afterstory 2: Really? My Mind Remembers My Past Lives?

Well, according to Hindu thought, yes!

Hindus believe that even after the body is long gone, the mind retains the memories of past lives. As long as the mind has unfulfilled desires and/or regrets from a previous life, it will keep looking for another body to take up residence in, so that, in its next lifetime at least, it may fulfil those desires/redress the wrongs it has committed.

Apparently, the very last thought your mind has before your body dies will determine what happens after. If you die wishing that you had lived your life better (been kinder, less lazy, not smoked, done nicer things for your mum or your kids), or that you had had a better life (maybe you would have liked to have been richer or taller or a different sex), your mind will remember that and ensure you live through another lifetime, during the course of which, invariably, you will create more desires for yourself and/or commit different mistakes. And begin the whole sorry cycle once again.



To escape from this trap, to end this endless cycle of samsara, is every Hindu's dearest wish, and all Hindu scriptures are essentially a set of recommendations on how that may be achieved. If you can tell yourself, at the time of your death, that you had the best life ever, that you have no regrets about things you did and did not do, that there is no one you need to apologize to, and nothing more you desire, you will be liberated, free.

But how can you ensure that you feel that way when you die, especially when you haven't the foggiest when you are going to pop it? By telling yourself those things, believing those things, doing everything that allows you to say those things with conviction – all the time! That means reviewing your life every few days, and course-correcting immediately when it seems to be veering off the path – if you feel you haven't done something nice for your mum in the past week, do it now; if you are feeling bad that you said something mean to a friend, say sorry now; if you feel that you are obsessing too much about your dream phone, make up a story for yourself – quickly – about how it won't really change your life, and let go of that desire. See how that works?

Start clearing your mind of samsara baggage, today! Go on, chop, chop!

१३

MUNDAKA

The Upanishad of the Big Shave

In which two little birds teach us a great truth



Aum!

Ye gods, bless us

That we may hear words that are pleasant

And see things that are blessed,

That we may live our lives in ways that nourish you.

O great Indra, O All-Knowing Poosha,

O Garuda, destroyer of evil, O great teacher Brihaspati,

Take care of us, blessed ones!

Aum Shaantih Shaantih Shaantih ||

THE BACKSTORY

Christmas 1918. In the bitter cold of a Delhi winter, leaders of the Indian National Congress (INC) huddled together, getting the final bits in place for the party's 33rd session, due to begin the next day. The person who had been picked to lead this session, as its president, was Pandit Madan Mohan Malaviya, a well-known educationist, editor, barrister, moderate leader and Sanskrit scholar.

Just a couple of years earlier, Pandit Malaviya, referred to admiringly by Mahatma Gandhi as Mahamana ('The Great Mind') had founded the iconic Banaras Hindu University, then one of the largest universities in the world. Three years before that, he had been part of the team that started the Scouting Movement in India, going on to become the country's first Chief Scout. Four years before that, in 1909, he had founded *The Leader*, an English newspaper that would become a highly influential flag-bearer of the Indian freedom struggle. As a barrister too, he had had many great courtroom victories before he hung up his robes in 1911, on his 50th birthday, to devote himself wholly to the freedom struggle.*

*He would don them again, just once, in 1924, to defend 170 revolutionaries who had been condemned to the gallows in the wake of the appalling carnage at Chauri Chaura. In February 1922, a group of non-violent Indian protesters had turned into a frenzied mob after police had opened fire on them. The mob locked the twenty-two British officers inside the police station and burnt it down, killing everyone inside. Pt Malaviya's impassioned and compelling arguments before the British judge, over four charged days, would result in over 150 of those death sentences being commuted to life imprisonment.

But back to the 33rd session of the INC, which is remembered for the many resolutions that were passed during that week, demanding complete self-governance for India. What is often overlooked about this session, however, is a rather significant sidelight – Pt Malaviya's recommendation that the Congress, and India, look to a particular Sanskrit phrase – Satyam eva jayate – The Truth Alone Triumphs – as their beacon and anchor while they fought the good fight. So powerfully did the sentiment of this mantra resonate, not just with the members of the INC but also with the people of India, that when India became independent, the founding fathers chose to adopt it as our nation's motto, and had it inscribed at the base of the lion capital we chose for our country's emblem.

The National Emblem of India



Great story. But we are talking about it here because? Because this phrase – Satyam eva jayate – is part of – you guessed it! – a verse in the Mundaka Upanishad. The whole line reads – ‘Satyam eva jayate na anritam’ – Truth alone triumphs, not falsehood.

Like the Prashna, the Mundaka Upanishad, as you would know after seeing its Shanti Mantra, is also considered to be part of the Atharva Veda. Its sixty-four verses are divided into three Mundakams or chapters, each with two sections. As with so many others, this Upanishad is also cast as a dialogue between a teacher, the sage Angiras, and his student, the householder Shaunaka.

The word Mundaka has its roots in ‘mund’, which means ‘to shave’. (Remember when you and your family were invited to a baby’s mundan? And how that baby’s shrieking while his or her head was shaved was part of your nightmares for weeks after? Yup, that kind of mund.) What does shaving have to do with this Upanishad? There are a couple of theories. One says that this Upanishad is aimed at sannyasis or monks, they of the shaven heads, and that its higher truth is accessible only to those who have renounced the world. [Which is a bit odd, considering the student asking the questions here is not a hermit or a brahmachari (celibate bachelor) but a

householder.] Another theory suggests that the mundan suggested by the name Mundaka is a ‘shaving away of ignorance’, which anyone who understands this Upanishad will experience.

Whatever. The important thing is the subject of the Mundaka. More than any other Upanishad, this one is scathing about those who revere rituals above all, believing that if they do ‘right action’ – perform rituals according to the rules, give charity, et al – the rewards of immortality will be theirs. The Mundaka insists that right action, even when done in the right spirit, can at most lead you to what it calls a ‘lower truth’. Of course, attaining this ‘lower truth’ helps create the discipline and platform needed to launch yourself into the bigger quest for the ‘higher truth’, the knowledge of Brahman,* but mistaking the lower truth for the higher, or believing that the former is all there is, marks one out as an ignoramus.

*The Mundaka refers to this higher truth as ‘Vedanta’. This is arguably the earliest recorded use of this famous, oft-used word!

The famous Upanishadic metaphor of the two birds on a tree, one restless, the other content – is also from the Mundaka Upanishad. Never heard that story? Time you did, then. Read on!

THE STORY

Brahma arose as the first among gods, creator, protector, guardian of the world. And to Atharvan, his beloved firstborn son, he revealed the knowledge of Brahman, which is the root of all knowledge. That knowledge Atharvan revealed to Angir in ancient times, and Angir to Satyavaha, and Satyavaha to Angiras.

One day, the householder Shaunaka went to pay the sage Angiras a visit, carrying firewood as every student does, and asked, ‘What is it, Bhagavan,

knowing which everything else may be known?’

‘There are two kinds of knowledge, the higher and the lower, that a man must know, Shaunaka, so the wise tell us,’ replied Angiras. ‘The lower knowledge is held in the four Vedas, in grammar and phonetics, linguistics and metrics, astronomy and etymology, ritual and poetry. The higher knowledge, on the other hand, is one by which the Imperishable One is grasped.’

That which mind cannot grasp, and eye cannot see,
That which has no hands, nor feet, nor family,
No caste, no colour, nor eyes, nor ears has He –
From that Deathless One, springs all life, verily.

As silken strands from the spider issue,
As plants sprout from the earth, on cue,
As hair grows on a man, without much ado –
The universe springs from Him, in the sages’ view.

Shaunaka nodded, rapt. ‘Please go on, sir.’

‘This is the truth, Shaunaka. Perform all the rituals as recommended – at the new moon, the full moon, the harvest, once every four months; make offerings to all the gods, feed guests and give alms – all this must be done. Pour your oblations into the sacred fire, in between the first and last pourings of ghee, so that it can lap them up with its seven flaming tongues – Kali the Black, Karali the Terrible, swift-as-thought Manojava, blood-red Sulohita, smoky Sudhumravarna, Sphulingini – spitting sparks, and beautiful Vishwaruchi.

‘Do that, and those offerings will beckon you – “Come, come!” – and whisk you away, on the shining rays of the sun, to a beautiful world you have

won by your good deeds.’

Well, that was good to know, thought Shaunaka to himself. He had always been very particular about doing everything that had been recommended by the scriptures. Of late, though, he had begun to feel a weariness with the humdrum routine of worldly life and it simply would not go away. Surely there was something bigger than the ritual, something he could do that would fill him with bliss and make him love his life again? However, the sage seemed to suggest that the rituals were indeed all.

But Angiras was speaking again. Shaunaka leaned in to listen.

‘Beware, Shaunaka! Such rafts are unsteady craft by which to cross the ocean of samsara!’

A-ha! There it came! Shaunaka focused harder. He did not want to miss a word now.

‘Those who delight in the ritual itself, believing it to be enough, believing it to be all, are truly deluded. They are like the blind leading the blind. Again and again, wallowing in ignorance, the fools congratulate themselves when they reach the world of the gods, saying, “We have reached our goal! Glory be!”

‘But they only abide there for a while, for once the rewards of their good deeds have been exhausted, their raft sinks and they fall back into the sea of samsara, to experience all the trials of life, and old age, and death, all over again.

‘But those who practise austerities and faith in the quiet places of the mind, who live the life of one who craves nothing from the world, they go, sinless, spotless, through the sun’s radiant door, to where the Imperishable One dwells, never to return.

‘When he sees how transient are the worlds of pleasure won by mere rituals and good deeds, a true seeker understands the futility of doing them.

Thoroughly disgusted, he declares – “What’s made cannot make That which is unmade!”* And firewood in hand, off he goes to find a teacher, someone who not only knows the scriptures but also knows Brahman, for only such a one can help the seeker build a sturdier ship for the stormy voyage across samsara. And to such a student, who approaches him with commitment and faith, and whose mind is tranquil, the wise teacher imparts, with delight, the higher knowledge.’

*In other words, mere physical actions (i.e., ‘what’s made’ by a man) like pouring offerings into a fire or giving away alms, cannot create the experience (‘cannot make’) of something that is as subtle, as non-physical, as difficult to grasp, as impossible to describe, as different from everything we know, as Brahman (‘That which is unmade’).

Then Angiras began to describe Brahman, and Shaunaka was transported.

‘Like the thousand sparks a blaze throws out,
No one spark like another –
So from Him, countless beings arise,
Each one unlike the other.

From Him come life, and mind, and sense
And the elements, the light, and more,
Moon and sun are His eyes; the doors to space
Are the ears of the One we adore.

His speech is the scriptures, His breath the air,
The earth from His feet emerges;
Fire, rain and gods from Him are born,
From Him the ocean surges.

Mountains, birds, food and faith,
The very sap in plant and tree,

Breath and actions, form and name –
The source of it all is He!’

Moved beyond words, Shaunaka bowed to the teacher.

‘My heart yearns for Brahman, venerable one,’ he said. ‘But what can I do to gain Him? Tell me, teach me, how this can be done!’

Angiras smiled. ‘Pick as your weapon the mighty bow of the Upanishad, beloved one,’ he said, ‘and place in it the arrow that is you, honed and made fierce by meditation. Draw on the bowstring with a mind focused unwaveringly on the Imperishable One, for He is your target. Now unleash it! With unstinting faith, let the arrow go, and you will be united with Brahman!’

‘Dismiss everything else that you know, except this one truth – He who is Brahman is indeed the Self which shines forth in you, and in every other creature. This is the knowledge that cuts the knots of self-doubt that strangle the heart, saumya*, this is how He is gained.

*Saumya simply means dear one, someone who is beloved. In the Upanishads, the teacher often uses this word to address his students.

‘Now let me tell you a story, Shaunaka, about two birds on a tree. They are inseparable, these two, always within sight of each other, always coming to rest on the same tree. One of them is usually perched on a lower branch – let’s call her the “lower bird” – the other, golden and radiant, perches on a higher one. The lower bird knows well that her companion is around, somewhere near her, and dearly wants to spend more time with her, but even as the thought crosses her mind, she spots a luscious-looking fruit. Waves of desire wash over her, wiping the thought of her friend from her mind, and she hops eagerly towards the fruit and begins to eat, enjoying the taste of it.

‘Once she has finished, her mind begins to drift towards her friend again, but suddenly, another fruit catches her eye, even more juicy-looking than the

last. Friend forgotten, she races towards it greedily, even though she is no longer hungry. She gobbles this one up too, and as she is scooping up the last bits, she spots yet another fruit. She thinks about waiting a while, even till the next day, but she is suddenly nervous and insecure. “What if that fruit is not there tomorrow?” she asks herself. “What if some other bird grabs it? What if I never find any other fruit again and, horror of horrors, die of starvation?” Working herself up into a state, she hops frantically to the new fruit and swallows it too.



‘And what of her friend, the higher bird? She does not move at all from her perch. She sits there, calm and composed, undistracted by all the delicious-looking fruit around her, quietly watching the frenzied activity below. She is not troubled by the fact that her friend does not seem to want her company, for she trusts that she will arrive eventually, when she is ready.

‘So this lower bird continues hopping from fruit to fruit, until, one day, something completely unexpected happens. She takes a bite of the fruit that

has just popped into her line of sight, and... *gags*. The fruit is bitter, so bitter that it is almost unbearable! As she wallows in self-pity, she remembers her friend, the higher bird. “Oh, how good it would feel to narrate my tale of woe to a friend who truly understands!” she thinks, and looks up, seeking her. And there she is, that golden-hued friend, patiently waiting, exactly where she had first perched.

‘Full of gratitude, and feeling vaguely guilty that she has neglected her all this while, the lower bird begins to fly up to her friend, but it is a long journey, and soon enough, her mind – and her eyes – begin to wander. Needless to say, they soon light upon... what else but another succulent fruit! All thoughts of her friend vanish, and she flutters away towards it, to begin her cycle of frantic, pointless activity all over again.’

Angiras paused, and Shaunaka smiled.

‘Thank you for that beautiful story,’ he said. ‘I understand now. The lower bird is the lesser Self, comprised of the senses, the mind and the intellect. The higher bird is the Supreme Self. Both of them rest in the tree that is the body. But the lower Self is too distracted by the luscious fruit, the temptations of the material world, and chases after them, forgetting the friend who accompanied it here, who is even now waiting, patiently, above. Only when she comes across a bitter fruit – a bitter life experience – does the lower Self finally go in search of the higher one, looking for solace, compassion and reassurance.’

‘That’s not all,’ said Angiras. ‘When the lesser Self finally reaches the Supreme Self, on its tenth, hundredth, thousandth attempt, it realizes that it had been deluded on this count as well – there has never been another bird! As she merges into that golden radiance that has been her constant companion, it finally dawns on the lower bird that the friend she had looked up to and adored is... none other than herself!’

‘How I wish I could get there myself some day, Venerable One!’ sighed Shaunaka.

Angiras was touched by the yearning in the student’s voice. ‘As you can see, saumya,’ he said, ‘this flight towards the higher bird is not an easy one. It cannot be attempted by the weak, the witless, or those who flounder aimlessly through life. But through right knowledge, and the constant practice of chastity, and by living a life of truth, you can most certainly get there.

‘Satyam eva jayate na anritam – it is truth alone that triumphs, not untruth. Casting off desire, walk the paths laid out by truth alone, and you cannot but reach the supreme abode of Truth, where dwells the Imperishable One. Just as the rivers flowing into the ocean lose their name and shape and disappear into it, so does he who has understood well the meaning of Vedanta lose name and form as he becomes one with the Immortal.

‘Know this, Shaunaka – he who knows the supreme Brahman becomes Brahman Himself. It is only to those who perform the rites (with dedication), know the scriptures (and understand them), make themselves the offering in the inner sacrificial fire (with faith) and are devoted to Brahman, that the knowledge of Brahman may be revealed.’

Tad etat satyam. This is the truth. This is what the sage Angiras declared, in ages long past.

All hail the wise sages! All hail the great seers!

Aum Shantih Shantih Shantih ||

THE AFTERSTORY

What is our takeaway from the Mundaka Upanishad? It begins by saying that performing rituals and doing good action, like giving charity to the needy,

takes one to the realms of the gods, and then proceeds to roundly condemn the people who do exactly that, calling them ‘moodhaah’ or fools. So should you, or should you not?

Let’s see now. While it’s true that it talks of ritual-performers with disdain, the Mundaka also clarifies, almost immediately, that the people it is calling ignorant are those who believe that the ritual is all there is to it, or those who only follow the word of the scriptures, not its spirit. We all know people like that. People who, for instance, spend an hour in prayer each morning at home, or visit places of worship, and drop undisclosed amounts into the donation box there, and so on, but who will also kick a dog out of their way on the street, snarl at a beggar child who comes to their car window, or treat the waiter at a restaurant like scum. It is such people that the Mundaka calls ignorant fools, for they haven’t understood the core message of whichever scripture they follow.

But even such people, says Angiras, who are proficient in the ‘lower knowledge’, gain rewards – after all, they have performed the rituals (all of which help them develop discipline), studied the scriptures (which are full of wisdom) and done some charity. But if they think that just doing those actions is going to give them the kind of mental peace they are seeking, they are so mistaken. Anyone who snarls at a child or hurts an animal without cause is clearly full of anger and bitterness and hate, and is the sort of person who sees those who are not his own as different, and therefore threatening or repulsive. Never mind Heaven, such people make their own lives, and the lives of those around them, absolute hell. The most incredible part? They think they are among the best people in the world because they’ve done their charity and said their prayers! What else would you call such people but ignorant fools?

On the other hand, if you can see the essence of the Supreme Soul in

every person and creature and tree and shrub, you will be full of love, not just for yourself but for everything around you. You will perform your duties and fulfil your responsibilities to your family, your community and the world – for instance, help your parents clean up the kitchen without being asked, cheerfully take on a tiny role in the school play without being resentful about the classmate who bagged the bigger one, join a rally against a plan to build a parking lot in place of a charitable hospital, and so on – with as much dedication and enthusiasm as you would fulfil a responsibility to yourself (like spending an hour watching TV after school, because you’ve worked so hard that day; or treating yourself to a giant chocolate milkshake because you’ve been running two kilometres every morning).



What’s more, you will do all the nice stuff you do for everyone else for no other reason than that it makes you feel good, just like watching that hour of TV or having that milkshake does. You will not expect mom or dad to thank you for your help, or your friends to pat your back for playing even your tiny role with gusto, or want to be featured in the newspapers the next morning as the youngest person who took part in the protest rally.

See what happened there? You focused hundred per cent on joyful effort, and zero per cent on the outcome of that effort. In the process, without even realizing it, you left anger, bitterness, jealousy, resentment, hate and expectation behind. You threw yourself into the work, whole-heartedly, dedicatedly, joyfully, but completely ‘renounced’ the results of that work. In other words, you became detached from the outcome of your actions, thus

gaining the ‘higher knowledge’.



Combine that ‘higher knowledge’ – detachment - with ‘lower knowledge’ – performing the rituals (being disciplined about homework and exercise), studying the ‘scriptures’ (reading an inspiring book or watching a movie that confirms your faith in humanity) and doing charity (by donating part of your pocket money to someone who needs it) – and what do you think will happen? Well, if the wise sages of the Upanishads are to be believed, you, boys and girls, will be well on your way to creating your own little piece of heaven for yourself, right here on earth. Try?





MANDUKYA

The Upanishad of the Frog

In which we learn that there's no grace like Aum



Aum! Ye gods, bless us
That we may hear words that are pleasant
And see things that are blessed,
That we may live our lives in ways that nourish you.
O great Indra, O All-Knowing Poosha,
O Garuda, destroyer of evil, O great teacher Brihaspati,
Take care of us, blessed ones!

Aum Shaantih Shaantih Shaantih ||

THE BACKSTORY

Many ancient Indian texts tell the story of Janaka, the great philosopher-king of Videha* (aka Mithila), one of the well-known kingdoms of the Vedic age. In the Upanishads, Janaka is hailed as a saint-king who was a great patron of sages and scholars. In the Ramayana, he is cast as the adoptive father of Sita. One of the best-known stories about him is about a dream he had. This is how it goes.

*Today, Videha would occupy a part of north and east Bihar, and a bit of eastern Nepal as well.

One night, the great king Janaka fell asleep, as usual, on the soft pillows and silken sheets draped over the soft mattress on the gilded cot in his royal bedchamber (you get the idea – King Janaka was wealthy beyond your wildest dreams). But no sooner had he drifted off into a deep sleep than he was woken up again, by a commotion right outside his door.

Janaka sat up instantly, all his senses on high alert, as the general of his army rushed in. ‘All is lost, O King!’ cried the general. ‘The enemy has stormed our gates and is swarming across the city, making for the palace. We must leave before it is too late!’ Leaping out of bed, the king grabbed his sword and followed the general through the safe route out of the palace and into the forest, along with his most trusted soldiers.



In the dark depths of the forest, however, the king was fatefully separated from his companions. For three days and three nights, Janaka roamed the forest alone, finding nary a morsel to eat. On the fourth day, exhausted and ravenous, he stumbled upon a few edible roots. Relieved, he dug them out with his bare hands and was about to begin eating when two wild boars rushed out of nowhere and gobbled the roots up. Janaka let out a howl of

frustration, and immediately wished he hadn't, for in the next instant, he heard a yell of triumph – 'I think I've found one of them!'

Janaka reached for his sword, but realized too late that he had lost it while crossing a river the previous day. Picking himself up with the last ounce of his strength, he began to run. But the enemy soldier had him within his sights! As the horse thundered towards him, Janaka turned around and saw the soldier draw his bowstring and let the arrow go...

'Sire, sire! Wake up! What has happened to you? Why are you screaming?'

Janaka sat up and looked around him with wild, disoriented eyes, his heart thudding in his chest, his body – and the luxurious sheets that draped his soft bed – drenched in sweat. His queen was by his side, looking very concerned.

'Calm down, sire,' she said soothingly. 'You have had a nightmare, that's all. However bad it was, it is over now. You are back in the real world.'

But Janaka would not be quieted. 'I wish it were that simple, my queen,' he said, in between shallow, ragged breaths. 'But it isn't. The question is, which one is real – this world, with you in it, or that world, where I was about to be killed by the arrow of an enemy soldier? Is this real, my love, or is that real?'

Worried, the queen called in, by turns, the royal physician, the prime minister, the general of the army (this was not a good idea at all, as you can imagine!), the queen mother and everyone else she thought might be able to help. But to each one, the king would only ask one question – 'Is this real, or is that real?' And he was never satisfied with their answer – 'This, of course, my king!'

Eventually, the great sage Ashtavakra* – literally, 'the one with eight deformities' – who happened to be passing through Mithila, arrived at the

palace gates and asked to see the king. When the king asked him his question – ‘Is this real, or is that real?’ – Ashtavakra let out a full-throated laugh, and whispered, with a wink, ‘Neither of them is, O King!’

Instantly, Janaka lit up with happiness. ‘A-ha!’ he said. ‘That makes me feel so much better. Although, if that is true, it begs the question – “Then what is real?”’

*Ashtavakra’s mother, Sujata, was the daughter of the sage Uddalaka. She was married to one of her father’s favourite students, Kahoda, who was also a teacher in Uddalaka’s gurukul. When she was pregnant with Ashtavakra, Sujata made sure she sat in on all the lessons taught by her father and her husband, so that her child would benefit from them. Once, when Kahoda was teaching, he mispronounced a word several times. The baby in the womb squirmed every time his father made the mistake, until, after he had done it for the eighth time, he could bear it no longer and cried out, ‘This is the eighth time you’ve mispronounced the word, Father!’ Furious at being humiliated in front of his students, Kahoda laid on his son a terrible curse, that he be born with eight deformities. Ashtavakra’s appearance made him the butt of all jokes, but he grew up to fulfil the promise he had shown in the womb and became a great Vedantin, a most revered teacher of the Vedanta.

‘It does,’ agreed Ashtavakra. ‘But first, let me ask you a question – would you say, O King, that you were present, actually present, in your nightmare?’

‘I most certainly was!’ said the king, shuddering. ‘I heard the twang of the bowstring, felt the warm, fetid breath of the boars...’

‘All right,’ said Ashtavakra. ‘And would you say you are here now, in this palace, reclining against soft pillows as you lie on these silken sheets?’

‘I guess I would.’

‘Well then,’ said Ashtavakra, ‘there’s your answer. Neither is that real, nor is this real. But you, O King, who were present there and are present here – you, and only you, are real.’

‘When you say “I” am real, do you mean my physical body, which is here now?’ said Janaka, puzzled. ‘Or do you mean my dream body, which fled the palace while my physical body still lay supine on this bed? Who am “I”?’

‘A-ha!’ said Ashtavakra. ‘Now *that’s* the real question, isn’t it?’

And he proceeded to deliver to the king a long discourse on many different subjects, including of course, the answer to Janaka's real question – 'Who am I?' We know that discourse today as the Ashtavakra Gita.



Ohhh-kay. But what does this story have to do with the Mandukya Upanishad? Well, the core question at the heart of the Mandukya is the one that Janaka asked Ashtavakra! What's more, the Mandukya uses the same device, of different states of consciousness – the wide-awake state, the dream state, and the deep-sleep state – to bring its message home.

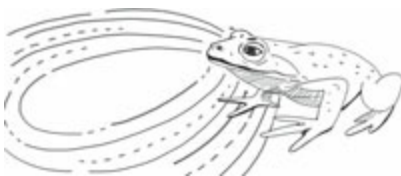
At just twelve mantras, the Mandukya is the shortest Upanishad of them all, but it packs a serious punch by addressing one of the most fundamental questions – Who Am I, Really? – that human beings have grappled with since the beginning of time. No wonder Adi Shankara declared that the Mandukya contained within its (very small) nutshell the entire wisdom of the Upanishads. Rama, the hero of the Ramayana, apparently believed that too. In the Muktika Upanishad, he tells Hanuman – 'If you had to pick just one Upanishad to master, Vayuputra, pick the Mandukya, and you will reach your goal of self-realization!'*

*Before you start celebrating – 'Understand just one Upanishad to gain ultimate bliss? I can totally do that!' – remember that this advice was for Hanuman, who, through the sheer power of his devotion to Rama, was well on his way to becoming a realized soul. As for other, less advanced seekers – ahem! – Rama goes on to say that depending on where they are in the hierarchy of realization, they would need to study the ten Principal Upanishads, or the thirty-two major ones, or, um, all 108 of them. Yeah, life's tough like that.

One of the other interesting things about this particular Upanishad is that the detailed commentary on it – the Mandukya Kaarika (composed by a sage called Gaudapada, who was the guru to another teacher called Govinda

Bhagavatpada, who was – yup, the guru to Adi Shankara – *read more about him on page 169*) – is as well known as the Upanishad itself. In fact, the text of the Upanishad has never been found independently - we only have access to it because it is the first chapter of the Mandukya Kaarika!

Now, where does the name Mandukya come from? One theory is that since the word Manduka means frog in Sanskrit, and the metamorphosis of a frog from tadpole to adult is a common metaphor for spiritual growth and enlightenment, ‘Mandukya’ is an apt name for an Upanishad that helps in this growth. Another says that the Upanishad was composed by a sage called Manduka. A third combines the two and speaks of Varuna, the god of the realms of water and sky and a venerated rishi himself, taking the form of a frog to sing the praises of the cosmic vibration Aum (which is the other subject that the Mandukya Upanishad concerns itself with). Pick your favourite!



How does the Mandukya link the question of who we are to the significance of the Pranava (another word for Aum)? Very creatively! By mapping the three states of consciousness to the three sounds that come seamlessly together to form the sacred syllable, the Mandukya explains not only who we all really are, but also how, by meditating on the Pranava, we can realize that truth about ourselves.

THE STORY

And the teacher said, ‘The whole world, everything that you can see, feel, perceive, intuit, deduce, understand, is that imperishable sound, that cosmic

vibration – Aum! It is what has been, what is, and what will be, and it is beyond these three, beyond time itself, this Aum!’

The student nodded. He could believe that about the Pranava. Each day, he felt its enormous power resound through his being when he chanted it before the start of a prayer or at the end of a lesson, meditated on it, or heard it being chanted in the quiet of a forest clearing by his fellow students. It calmed him deeply, those three sounds that coalesced into the Aum – the vast, expansive ‘A’ vibrating in his abdomen before it rose into his chest as the more focused ‘U’, which radiated through his upper body before it rose even further, into his head, as the rounded, sonorous ‘M’, where it reverberated, it seemed to him, in harmony with the hum of the very universe.

But if you had asked him which his absolute favourite bit was, he would have picked without hesitation the brief pause right after the chant, when the last of the M still hung, soundless, in the air; that moment of utter peace and quiet, even blankness, between one ‘Aum’ and the next. Everything around him – mountains, trees, people, earth, sky – and his own physical body seemed to melt away in that golden moment, losing shape, form and name as they merged into each other and into the cosmos, just as the A melted into the U and the U into the M. His breath was momentarily stilled, and the universe itself seemed to be held – by him! – in suspended animation. The student shivered. Even the memory of that moment made his hair stand on end.

‘This Aum, my boy, is Brahman – it is the whole, it is all of it, there is nothing else. And this soul, ayam atma...’

The teacher paused, and the student felt his breath catch in his throat. He knew, somehow, that the teacher was about to reveal something momentous.

‘Ayam atma Brahma!’ said the teacher, and the student felt a delicious awe run through him. ‘This Atma inside you, your individual soul, that

Atma... is Brahma. You, my boy, are God!’

There it was. No frills, no flourishes, no mystical riddles. A simple fact of life, simply delivered. Ayam atma brahma. This Self is God. What was left to be said?

If only one knew how to truly *feel* like God, though, how to reach and claim that utterly calm, utterly compassionate, utterly non-judgmental, utterly content part of oneself!

‘Just like Aum has four parts – A, U, M and the pause after...’ The student looked up, startled – had the teacher read his mind? ‘...the Self or the Atma has four feet on which it stands, four ways in which it experiences the world and itself. These are the four states of consciousness.

‘The first is the wakeful state – jagrita (say jaag-rita) – which you and I are in now. In this state, the Self is turned outwards, conscious only of the external world – engaging with it, interacting with it, consuming it, processing it, making sense of it. It is as if the Atma is Vaishvanara himself, the Universal One of the seven limbs, who straddles the cosmos like a colossus, who is the cosmos. His head is the sky, his eyes the sun and moon, his ears all of space, his breath the wind, his speech the Vedas, his heart the world, his feet the earth – he is the doer of all actions, the thinker of all thoughts, the enjoyer* of all things.

*In the Upanishads, enjoyer just means ‘someone who experiences’. All the experiences that one ‘enjoys’ are not necessarily what we would consider joyful ones. But looking at an experience as either good or bad, scary or reassuring, pleasant or unpleasant, is human folly. If, as your true Self does, you look at an experience simply as something to be lived through and learnt from, any experience can be ‘enjoyed’. See why it makes sense to connect with your true Self?

‘As the Vaishvanara in the body, the Atma, in the wakeful state, is the doer of all the body’s actions, the thinker of all the mind’s thoughts, the consumer and enjoyer of all the material things it takes in through its nineteen mouths. Which are, of course,

- the five senses, plus
- the five organs of action (the mouth that speaks, the arms that grasp, the legs that move, the anus that eliminates waste, the organs that reproduce), plus
- the five breaths* that convert the air the body breathes and the food it eats into the fuel that sustains life, plus
- the four forms of the ‘mental body’ (antahkarana) – which are the mind (manas) that thinks thoughts and feels emotions; the intellect (buddhi) that sifts through the thoughts and emotions generated by the mind to decide the right course of action; the ego (ahamkara) that mistakes the body and mind and intellect for the Atma and calls them ‘I’; and the memory (chitta) which remembers and forgets selectively, and thus influences the mind and the intellect.’

*For a quick refresher on the five breaths, check out Sage Pippalada’s answer to Prashna 3 in the Prashna Upanishad, on page 244.

That was quite a visual, marvelled the student to himself, as he imagined himself to be Vaishvanara, consuming, consuming, consuming – sights, sounds, tastes, smells, feelings, ideas, emotions, fears, hopes, memories, both his own and other people’s. But it was true – as long as a man was awake, it was all about the body seeking to quench its hunger, and about the senses feeding the mind with stimuli, causing thoughts and emotions to erupt constantly and randomly.

‘The second state of consciousness,’ continued the teacher, ‘the second “foot” on which the Atma stands, the second way we experience things, is the dream state – swapna – that comes to us in sleep. In this state, the senses are withdrawn and the mind now has the opportunity to look inwards, to turn a light on itself. In this state, the Atma is Taijasa, the Illuminated One. In swapna, the mind constructs a dream world from all the inputs it has received

from the material world in the waking state, and all the actions and desires that have left their impressions on it. In this dream world, one's fondest hopes and deepest fears, some never acknowledged in the waking state, bubble up to the surface. Wishes are fulfilled in swapna, nightmares come true.

'This dream world seems so real to the mind that the seven limbs and the nineteen mouths of the Self, the Atma, are still seemingly working, the limbs doing exactly what they do in jagrita, the mouths still consuming, consuming, consuming, still enjoying, even if the things it experiences are insubstantial and disappear in the clear light of day...'

It was true, thought the student to himself. When he awoke from a nightmare, it took several minutes before his heart stopped thudding or his panicked breath returned to normal. The body certainly believed in the dream world conjured up by the mind and reacted exactly as it would to a crisis in the waking state.

'The third state of consciousness, the third foot on which the Self stands, is sushupti, the state of deep sleep. Here the mind thinks no thoughts, dreams no dreams, feels no desire. In this state, the Atma is Prajna – the Knowing One. Withdrawing everything – senses, mind, memory, imagination, all thoughts, all actions – into itself, the Atma is at last at rest, in deep repose, a mass of consciousness, the seed of everything that was, is and will be. All distinction vanishes – when the Self doesn't see itself as "I", it cannot see the other as different, as "You". As "I" merges into "You", so does subject merge into object, the seer into the seen, and This into That – until at last, there is only one. As Prajna, the Self consumes nothing, but continues to enjoy – not material things as in jagrita, not imaginary things as in swapna, but deep, deep bliss, ananda (say aa-nanda).

'This, my boy, this Prajna, is the lord of all, the knower of all, the source of all, the true enjoyer of everything the body experiences through its seven

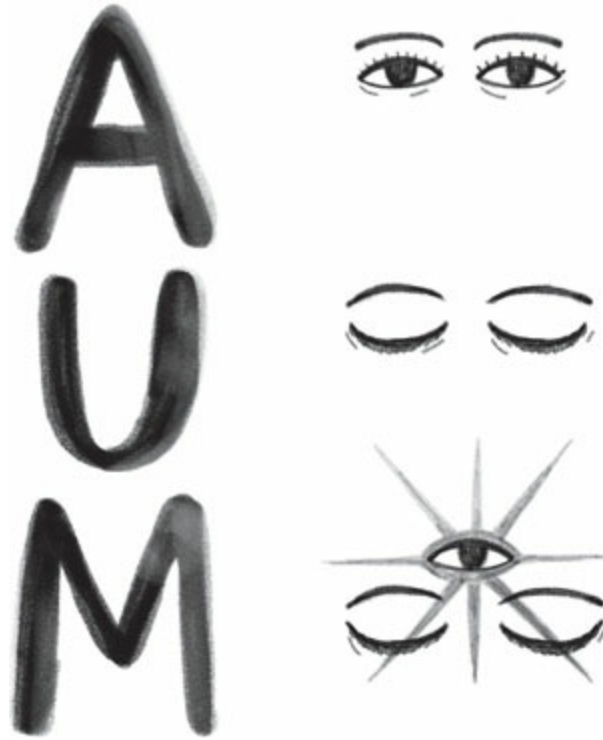
limbs and nineteen mouths, the beginning and end of all things. The tragedy is that we are never conscious of this aspect of the Atma – we never see our own true self even though it is revealed to us every time we are in deep sleep. The tragedy is that when the sleeper returns to the waking state, he instantly returns to being Vaishvanara, fed by the senses, seeing separateness everywhere instead of oneness, and experiencing, as a result, pain, grief, anger, fear and hate.’

Ah, sighed the student. How wonderful it would be to experience the bliss one experienced in deep sleep while one was conscious! If that could happen, why would anyone ever want to return to being Vaishvanara?

‘Tell me, sir,’ he said to the teacher. ‘Is Prajna then the highest state of consciousness? If we could stay there forever, would we be liberated?’

‘Ah, but you cannot stay there forever, can you?’ smiled the teacher. ‘For Prajna is just as transient as Taijasa and Vaishvanara – when the state of deep sleep passes, so does Prajna.’

So it did, agreed the student. And anything that changed, that was transient, was not the ultimate reality, which was unchanging and immortal.



‘Don’t look so despondent,’ smiled the teacher. ‘Think about this – even though you are never conscious in the Prajna state, there is one part of you that remembers it well once you come out of it, the part which says, “I slept so well. I am so refreshed.”’

‘That is true!’ cried the student. ‘How do I remember, how *can* I remember, that I slept well? All my tools of remembering and recognition – my mind, my intellect, my memory and my ego – are withdrawn in sushupti, the state of deep sleep! Who, then, is the “I” that says, “I slept so well”? Who was it that experienced that state of blissful sleep, first-hand, and remembered it too?’

‘There is one,’ said the teacher, ‘which is beyond Prajna. The last “foot” of the Self, the fourth state of consciousness, is called, simply, the Fourth, or turiya, for there is no other way to describe it. It is neither an outward-looking state, like jagrita, nor an inward-looking one, like swapna. It is not a mass of consciousness, like sushupti, but it is not non-consciousness either. It

is indescribable, unnameable, invisible. You cannot engage with it, or speak of it, or claim any relationship to it (because a relationship can only exist between two different things, and turiya contains everything, everything, inside itself), or think any thought about it (because it is beyond the range of thought). But it abides in you, a silent witness to your every action and word and thought.

‘It is your Atma, in the blessed fourth state of turiya, that is the enjoyer of all that you experience in all three states of consciousness, for turiya is inside each of them and yet is none of them,* supporting them all, illuminating them all. It is the Atma, in the state of turiya, which is the real “I”, your true Self, not your body or mind or thoughts or emotions or memory.’

*The best way to explain this concept is to think of the three states of consciousness as three ornaments made of gold – a bracelet, say, and a necklace and a ring – and the turiya state as gold itself. The gold is in all the ornaments, but is itself none of the ornaments – you can’t say, for instance, that ‘gold’ is the same as a bracelet. And although a bracelet may look quite different from a necklace and a necklace from a ring, and although each of them may have unlike functions, to the goldsmith they are all just gold. In the same way, although the three states of consciousness may have distinct names, forms and functions, they are all really turiya. Just as no golden ornament would exist without gold, there would be no consciousness without turiya, which makes each state possible.

‘I can’t think of anything I want more in the world than to experience turiya, sir,’ said the student, ‘for it seems to me that it is a combination of true knowledge (sat), true consciousness (chit) and true bliss (ananda). But if I can’t even experience the Atma as Prajna, how can I ever hope to experience it as turiya, which is beyond Prajna?’

‘There is a way,’ the teacher said. ‘And I will teach it to you.’

The student sat up, delighted and expectant.

‘You see, my boy, turiya is contained in the Omkara, in the syllable ‘Aum’. Meditate on the Omkara with faith, devotion and true understanding, and you will enjoy not just the first three states of consciousness, but also

what lies beyond them, while you are fully conscious.

‘The first sound of the Omkara – A (say aa) – is Vaishvanara, for it is the first letter of the alphabet, just as Vaishvanara is the first state of consciousness. Chant A with devotion, giving thanks to the visible universe as you do, and you will master your senses, and thus master Vaishvanara. Then will you become the first among equals, and obtain your heart’s desire.

‘The second sound – U (say oo) – comes from ubhayatva, or ‘intermediate’, and stands for Taijasa, for it is the intermediate state of consciousness. Chant U with dedication, worshipping the invisible universe within you and without you, and you will master your dreams, and thus master Taijasa. Then will you be blessed, and your descendants will all tread the path of the spiritual life.

‘The third sound of the Omkara – M (say mm) – comes from ‘im’ – ‘to merge’ – and represents Prajna, in which state everything merges and becomes one. Chant M with faith, and you will still your mind. Your sense of “I”, your sense of separateness from everything else in the universe, will fall away from you and you will see the oneness of all things, and enjoy Prajna in the conscious state. So will the measure of your understanding grow, and you with it.

‘The fourth part of the Omkara – that infinitesimal, infinite pause between one Aum and the next – has no letter, no sound and no characteristics. It is beyond description and ungraspable, cannot be heard and cannot be spoken of – but it contains within it the three sounds of the Omkara, which contain the entire universe. This is the supreme state of turiya. This is Atman, your true self. This is Brahman.

‘Meditate on the pause, knowing Aum as turiya, knowing Aum as your true Self! He who knows this, and meditates on the Omkara, unceasingly, consistently, with faith and devotion, becomes the Omkara, and realizes his

true self.'

Aum Shantih Shantih Shantih ||

THE AFTERSTORY

Afterstory 1: Need help with a school report? Never fear, the Upanishads are here!

Don't you just love how logically, how scientifically, even, the sages of the Mandukya Upanishad approached an entirely new field of study? The field, of course, was 'states of consciousness', and as far as we know, these men were among the first in the world to focus on this subject. How did they do it?

Actually, how would you do it? If you had been given a project to research something that had never been researched before, on which no data exists, either on the Internet or otherwise, where would you start? Let's say your project was to create a PPT presentation on the 'littering pattern' on the street outside your school. The report would have to include not only information on how and where littering happens, by whom, and when, but also suggestions on how it can be controlled. Got that? Great. Now put this book away for ten minutes, and think about the steps you would need to take to create your presentation.

All done? Now let's do a quick rundown of the steps the Mandukya sages used to arrive at their own brilliant presentation – The States of Consciousness and How They Relate to Aum (aka the Mandukya Upanishad). Then we can compare their steps and yours. Here goes.

•Step 1: Don't assume; observe.

Instead of saying, 'Hey, there are two states of consciousness, the waking and the sleeping – everyone knows that!' or 'Hey, let's declare that there are

eight states of consciousness, spin a fabulous story around each and dazzle our audience with tonnes of colourful slides – that’s what really counts in these things!’, the sages sat down and observed their own minds, extensively, obsessively, trying different thought experiments (can the mind observe the mind?), reflecting deeply on tricky questions (is daydreaming a separate state of consciousness? Maybe not, because the body is still receiving stimuli from the external world, same as in jagrita), and brainstorming with fellow explorers.

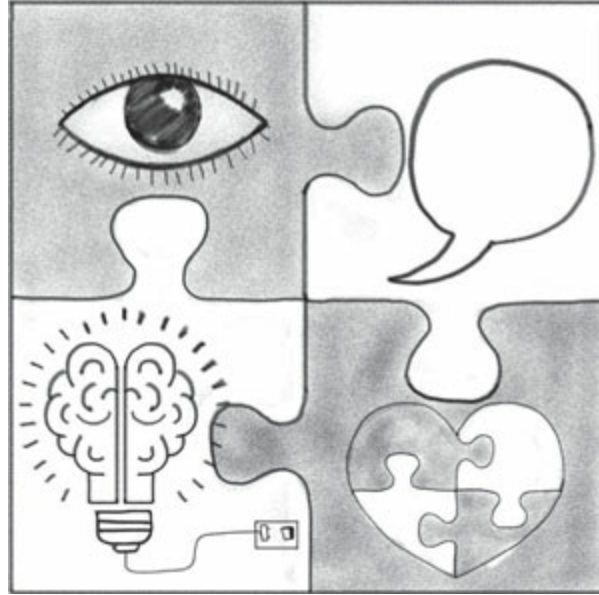
•**Step 2: Organize your data; then analyze and classify it.**

Once they had made their observations and had their data together, the sages sliced and diced it many ways (jagrita-Vaishvanara / swapna-Taijasa / sushupti-Prajna) to come up with three separate states of consciousness. Then, after considering the question, ‘But how do we remember enjoying the bliss of deep sleep, given that the mind is not functional in that state?’ they deduced that there must be a fourth state, beyond the mind, just as astronomers today deduce the location of an invisible black hole by the behaviour of objects around it.

•**Step 3: Communicate your findings in a lucid manner.**

The sages of the Upanishads were never content to perform their experiments for their own sake. They believed it was their sacred duty to share their findings with as many people as possible, so that the knowledge was not lost to humanity. So they gave each of their four states names (the fourth state was indescribable, so they simply went with ‘The Fourth’), put them down in logical sequence, and described each briefly but clearly. Like the best communicators and teachers, they started with the known (the waking state) and then took their audience, step by step, to the unknown (turiya). To make the presentation less dry (God knows there are too many of those!), they used poetic, even trance-y language (for instance, here’s how they described turiya – ‘adrishtam avyavahaaryam agraahyam alakshanam

achintyam avyapadeshyam’ – that which cannot be seen, discussed, or grasped; that which has no defining qualities, is beyond thought, and cannot be described in words) and rich visual imagery (‘seven limbs, nineteen mouths’).



•**Step 4: Turn your audience into believers.**

It is all very well to report our own findings, thought the Mandukya sages, but unless we also give people a methodology that they can use to corroborate them, we will not be able to create evangelists who understand the findings and believe in them and spread the word. So they came up with a practice – Meditating on the Aum – and suggested that their audience try it diligently. If they did so, promised the sages, they would reach the same state of bliss that one reached in deepest sleep, except this time they would be aware of it when it happened!



With that kind of hook, is it any wonder that so many millions of people, over the millennia, have wanted desperately to try the practice? And that the small percentage of them who actually stick with it and experience the promised bliss, recommend it so highly?

Now, let's see how this four-step Mandukya process can be mapped to your 'littering pattern' project.

- **Don't assume** it is the kids from the slum down the road or the rich 'brats' in their fancy cars who litter; instead, **observe** the street for several days, with no preconceived notions.
- **Organize your data** by, say, the kinds of people who litter (all kinds, you may conclude, there is no 'littering type'), the kinds of litter (candy wrappers, paper teacups, cigarette butts), the time of day when littering is highest (right after mealtimes, maybe), the kinds of places that people seem to litter in more (they add to already-existing piles of garbage, perhaps, because of the lack of bins), and so on. **Analyze and classify it** by, say, time of day ('morning and evening litterers are office-goers who drink chai at the bus stop kiosk; afternoon-litterers are kids from my

school who bring candy bars in their lunch bags).

- **Communicate your findings** at a meeting in the local hall or club, which is attended by students from your school, local residents and top executives of the companies that have offices on the street.
- Instead of blaming or guilt-tripping your audience, explain how you can work together to create a beautiful and clean street for all of you to enjoy (you may recommend that offices donate bins, local residents take turns policing the street for litterers and each grade in the school spends five minutes of its lunch break one day of the week picking up whatever little litter is left). When tasks are shared, people are more likely to co-operate, and once they see how a clean street boosts their mental well-being, they will work towards it without being told. See what you did there? **You turned your audience into believers!**

And you thought the Upanishads had nothing practical to teach you! Ha!

Afterstory 2: Sat+chit+ananda: The Real Real

Remember how, in the story of King Janaka, the sage Ashtavakra told him that neither the dreaming state nor the waking state was real? What did he mean, really? Surely the waking state is real and the dreaming state is not? I mean, who can argue with the fact that real food satisfies hunger in a way that dream food, erm, does not?

Hey-hey, hang on! This is the You who lives in the waking state speaking, right? Of course you would say this world is real and the other is not! If you asked the You who lives in the dream state the same question, he or she would insist the dream state was real, while what you call real was the dream state.

Now what if a third You came along and told you that both your so-called real world and your so-called dream world are mithya, not real? What if he or she said that the real real world was somewhere else, but you did not realize

that because you were in a dream state? There is no real reason to disbelieve that, is there? How can you be hundred per cent sure that this world is not a dream world, and that, when you finally wake up in the real, real world, you will not turn to your friend, and say, like Alice, at the end of *Alice in Wonderland*, ‘Oh, I have had such a curious dream!’?

That is what Ashtavakra meant when he said both the real world and the dream world were *mithya*. For the ancient sages tell us that when we realize who we really are, when we understand that we are no different from any other creature in the world, we will ‘awake’ to a new world, one in which we are truly free from dreams and delusion. That knowledge of oneness, they say, is *sat*, the real real, the true knowledge. That state of consciousness in which *sat* is gained is *chit*, true consciousness. And that bliss, that is enjoyed when *sat* and *chit* come together, is the truest, purest bliss, *ananda*.

In that sense, the only *real* real world, the one into which we must all strive to wake up, is *sat-chit-ananda*, the world in which true consciousness gains true knowledge to create unending, unchanging, glorious bliss.

Afterstory 3: Spot the Mahavakya!

One last thing. Did you notice that there was a Mahavakya, one of the four grand pronouncements of the Vedas and Upanishads, lurking somewhere in this Upanishad? You did? Super. Can you say it out loud?

Ans: ‘Ayam atma Brahma’ – This Self is Brahma. This is the Mahavakya of the Atharva Veda.

१५

TAITTIRIYA

The Upanishad of the Partridges

In which we learn that each of us is really a
Matryoshka doll



Aum!

May He in the Highest Heaven

Protect both of us, teacher and student; Nourish both of us together

So that we may work together with great energy,

So that we may learn from each other,

So that our learning is effective,

So that we steer clear of dispute and discord.

Aum Shaantih Shaantih Shaantih ||

THE BACKSTORY

Remember that hilarious exchange from the movie *Shrek*, where Shrek is trying to explain to Donkey that there is more to ogres than meets the eye? To illustrate, he tells Donkey that ogres are like onions. Needless to say, Donkey misunderstands, asking if ogres stink, or make you cry, or get all brown when left out in the sun. Until an exasperated Shrek yells that both onions and ogres have *layers*!

Remember? Of course you do. (If you have not watched *Shrek*, right about now's a good time to fill in that huge gap in your education.) But what's it doing here, in the chapter on the Taittiriya (say taitti-reeya) Upanishad?

Well, according to the Taittiriya, we humans have layers just as ogres do! We are onions too, or, to use another, less smelly, metaphor, we are all really Matryoshkas, those classic Russian nested dolls. (Remember *those*? The doll inside the doll inside the doll, all identically shaped, only smaller and smaller as you go along?) Our true Self, says the Taittiriya, is enclosed in five concentric layers, or sheaths (of consciousness). Only when these sheaths are peeled away is our true Self revealed. And what are those five sheaths? Hold your horses – for now, let's learn a little more about the Upanishad itself.

Thousands of years ago, in a scenic hermitage in the deep-dark of the Indian jungle, a student quarrelled horribly with his teacher and mentor. Incensed, the teacher, Vaishampayana, ordered the student, Yagnavalkya, to return to him the Veda he had been taught, for he had proved an unworthy student. Equally furious, but duty-bound to obey his teacher, Yagnavalkya vomited the entire Yajur Veda on the forest floor. Seeing their opportunity, the other students of Vaishampayana, who had been looking on at the great showdown in horror, turned themselves into partridges and sucked up as much as they could of the 'regurgitate' (for this version was rather special, and a limited edition to boot – it was the Yajur Veda as processed by the great Yagnavalkya!). Later, these students, individually and collectively, would pass on Yagnavalkya's understanding of the sacred Veda to their own students, in the form of this very Upanishad. And that's the (admittedly stomach-turning) story of how the Taittiriya Upanishad ('tittri' is Sanskrit for partridge) came to be named.



Matryoshka nesting dolls

The Taittiriya is part of the Krishna Yajur Veda. Instead of being a separate text, however, the three chapters of the Taittiriya are the sixth, seventh and eighth chapters of the Taittiriya Aranyaka, called *Shikshavalli* (with twelve ‘anuvakas’, or lessons), *Brahmanandavalli* (or simply, *Anandavalli*, with nine anuvakas), and *Bhriguvalli* (ten anuvakas) respectively. ‘Valli’ literally means a creeper, so you can imagine these three chapters as three sturdy offshoots of the tree of the Taittiriya Aranyaka.

Right. End of intro. On to the mind-expanding chapters now!

THE STORY

SHIKSHAVALLI – THE CREEPER OF INSTRUCTION

The Shikshavalli leaves esoteric metaphysical topics aside to focus entirely on the Vedic school curriculum – it talks, among other things, of phonetics, and the right sound, accent, stress and metre to be used while pronouncing a word or reciting a chant. Along the way, it takes a little detour to talk about Aum and three other holy vibrations. (Can you guess which ones they are? *Hint*: They are always uttered before chanting the Gayatri Mantra. Check if

you got them right, in the next section).

Anuvaka 3 – Wheels within wheels

Is everything in nature interconnected? Is every creature equal to every other? Not all religions and philosophies believe that – some, in fact, insist that God created everything else in the world for his supreme creation, man, to rule over and enjoy, but the Upanishads strongly declare that everything and everyone in the universe is an equal, shining strand in the great web of life.

What connects the earth to the sky? Space –
Space traversed by air.

What connects the fire and the sun? Water –
Water blazed through by lightning.

What connects the teacher to the student? Knowledge –
Knowledge imparted through instruction.

What connects a mother to a father? The child –
The child born of love.

What connects the lower jaw and the upper jaw? Speech –
Speech formed of the tongue.

See how cleverly the teacher in the Shikshavalli connects the obvious (what connects the teacher and the student? Knowledge) to the somewhat obscure (what connects the fire and the sun? Water)? All kinds of small jumps and big leaps of imagination are needed to wrap one's head around the idea of a God who resists definition, and the underlying sameness of things that seem very different from one another. What better way to help students develop those skills than to nudge them towards it by degrees, as the teacher does in this anuvaka?

Anuvaka 5 – A Mystical Sound Garden

Remember we talked about the three holy vibrations in the previous section? The three that have become an inseparable part of the Gayatri Mantra today, even though they are not part of the original mantra? Well, according to the Taittiriya, they are *Bhur*, *Bhuvas* and *Suvah* – did you guess them right? As always, the sages of the Upanishads compare the three sounds, which anyone can chant, to different elements of the cosmos, thus connecting the personal to the universal. By repeating these powerful sounds while meditating on them, says the Taittiriya, you can master not only your own senses and thoughts, but the entire universe. For you are not only a microcosm of the universe, but the universe itself.

*Bhur, Bhuvas, Suvah are the three holy sounds. To these, Mahachamasya added a fourth – Mahas, which is the Self, Brahman.**

*As you will see in the verses that follow, Mahas also refers to the cosmic vibration, Aum, which, as the Mandukya Upanishad tells us, is no different from Brahman.

Bhur is the earth, Suvah the sky,
and Bhuvas what's in between –
But they would be nothing without Mahas the sun,
In his light, the three worlds preen.

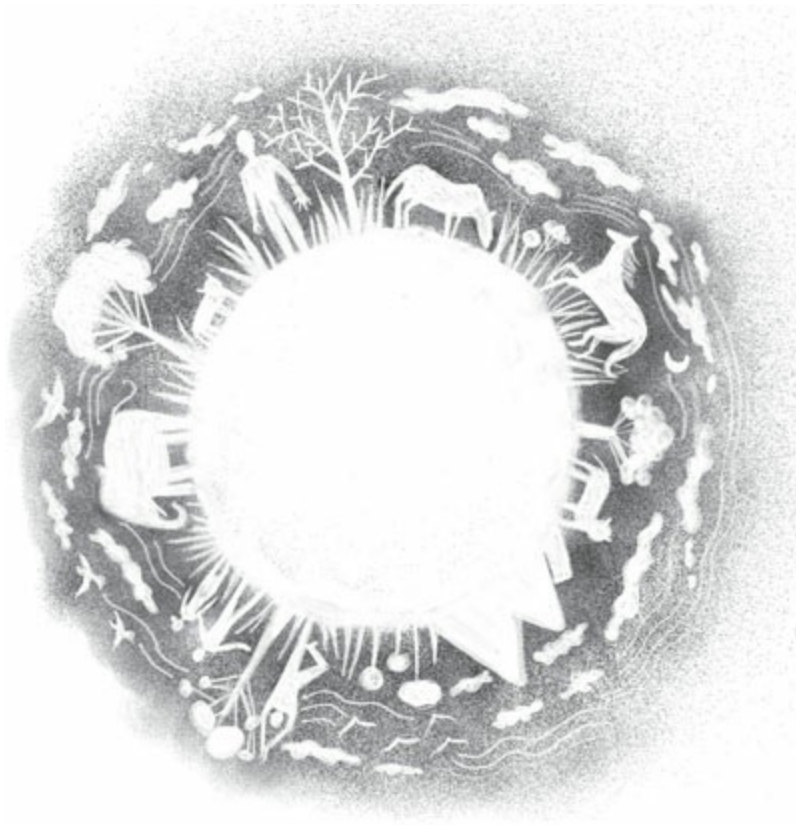
Bhur is the fire, Suvah the sun,
Bhuvas the air that binds them –
But it is Mahas the moon that holds up the sky
And oh-so-joyously minds them.

Bhur is the Rig, Suvah the Yajur,
Bhuvas the song of the Sama –
But would they shine so bright were they not sheathed

In Aum the Mahas' golden armour?

Bhur is the in-breath, Suvah the out-breath,
Bhuvas the blessed pause 'twixt the two;
But annam – food – is the Mahas that nourishes
Every breath that's strong and true.

Four mystical sounds times four
Make sixteen holy vibrations;
Meditate on these – they are, to Brahman
The sacred invocations.



Anuvaka 9 – Learn and teach, teach and learn

In the Vedic Age, as you know, students returned to the real world to take up

the real business of life after spending up to a dozen years in disciplined study, work and play in the safe space of the gurukul. They were strapping young men by then, ready to earn a living, shoulder the responsibilities of a householder's life and become upstanding members of their communities. But before they left them for good, their fond gurus were wont to issue a last set of stern instructions. Like this one:

Practise right conduct, while learning and teaching;
Stay true to yourself, while learning and teaching;
Perform the rituals, while learning and teaching;
Beget children, while learning and teaching;
Practise austerity, self-control, tranquillity, compassion –
While learning and teaching, learning and teaching.

In other words, this teacher in the Taittiriya is saying – live a full, rich and upright life, but never, ever stop learning and passing on what you've learnt. Whether you are student or teacher, self-learning – *svaadhyaya* – is vital, because the pursuit of knowledge, when it becomes a joyful, lifelong enterprise, staves off boredom and depression, keeps the brain agile and ensures that you stay engaged with a constantly changing world. As for teaching – *pravachana* – why, that is super-important too, for not only is the passing on of knowledge a noble act in itself, but it's also one of the best ways to get a better understanding of what you have learnt – you have to know something really well before you can teach it to someone else.

More importantly, one in the absence of the other is incomplete – gaining knowledge without passing it on is selfish, and simply passing on what you learnt a long time ago, without bothering to update your knowledge with more recent information, is a disservice both to yourself and your student. Taken together though, so the Upanishad tells us, *svaadhyaya-pravachana*

are magic. Try it and see!

Anuvaka 11 – Commencement speech to graduating students

Yup, convocation addresses and commencement speeches are not a modern invention – they were given to graduating students even 2,500 years ago in Indian gurukuls! And not much has changed in their content either.

So what exactly did the teachers of the Taittiriya Upanishad tell their graduating class? Here's the entire list. Place a tick or a cross next to each point depending on whether you think it is good advice (or not) for a twenty-one-year-old in the 21st century.

(Quick quiz: Part of this commencement speech is a very famous Sanskrit verse that urges you to treat your parents, teachers and guests as gods (points no. 8–11). Can you remember the original verse? Hint: Point no. 11 has a connection with Aamir Khan.)

1. *Do not neglect the truth.*
2. *Do not neglect the law.*
3. *Do not neglect your health.*
4. *Do not neglect your daily svaadhyaaya and pravachana.*
5. *Do not neglect the rites and rituals.*
6. *Do earn money – prosperity is essential to a good life.*
7. *Do have children – it is your responsibility to further the race.*
8. *See your mother as a god.*
9. *See your father as a god.*
10. *See your teacher as a god.*
11. *See your guest as a god.**
12. *Do only good and irreproachable deeds, not others.*
13. *Follow only good and irreproachable practices, not others.*
14. *When you're with wise and good people, don't talk or argue*

unnecessarily – listen instead.

15. *When you're with wise and good people, give of yourself generously, with faith and humility.*
16. *If you are not sure what the right thing to do is in any situation, observe the actions of gentle, law-abiding, wise people around you, and do what they do.*
17. *If you are not able to decide who is right in a situation, especially when people around you are being critical of one or the other, observe the actions of experienced, qualified, law-abiding, gentle people around you, and do as they do.*

*The original Sanskrit verse, as you must have guessed by now, is: *Maatr devobhava, Pitr devobhava, Acharya devobhava, Atithi devobhava*. And the Aamir Khan connection? Some years ago, 'Atithi Devobhava' was chosen as the tagline of a campaign by the Union tourism ministry to urge Indians to make foreign tourists feel welcome and safe in our country. Aamir Khan was the celebrity ambassador of that campaign.

Did you notice how, in points 16 and 17, the quality of gentleness is held up as being something to look for in a mentor? You can, and should, look up to people who are smart and successful and qualified and cool, of course, but unless they are also gentle – *alooksha* – say the Upanishads, be careful about making them your role models. That's a wise, heart-warming piece of advice if there ever was one.



BRAHMANANDAVALLI – THE CREEPER OF SUPREME BLISS

The Brahmanandavalli comes at the core Upanishadic question – Who am I, really? – from a different angle, declaring that our true self, Atman, lies hidden inside several sheaths, or kosha, of superficial or false knowledge. It

also includes a ‘bliss ladder’ to explain just how ginormous Brahma-bliss (topmost rung of ladder) is, compared to human bliss (bottom-most rung).

Anuvaka 2-5: The Kosha Question

The Taittiriya talks about the Self as being veiled in five separate sheaths – the panchakosha. Each sheath or kosha feels so real that we are often deceived into believing that one of the *sheaths* is who we are. Let’s try to get past the panchakosha, one by one, and see if we can reach Supreme Bliss.

Now then, when you ask yourself the question – ‘Who am I?’ – what is the first, most obvious answer that comes to mind? The body, of course. ‘I am my body,’ you say. ‘The colour of my skin and hair and eyes, this particular kink in my pinky finger, the way my hair frizzes on a humid day, the smell of my sweat, my incipient beard, my crooked teeth – these are all uniquely me. This is who I am.’

Great. Now, what are you made of? In other words, what is your body, which you identify as you, made of? You might say your body is made of blood and muscle and bones, or go a little deeper and say it is composed of cells and tissues, or go even more basic and say it is built of carbon, hydrogen and oxygen. The Upanishad, however, takes a macro view. Essentially, says the Upanishad, your body is made of nothing but... *food*. It is food, after all, that grows your body, makes it possible for it to carry out its functions and gives it the strength to do what it does – walk, swim, cycle.

From food, surely, are made all creatures –
By food alone they live, and survive, and thrive,
And into food they pass in the end.

Food is Brahman, the foremost of all beings,
The healing herb, the eldest, most revered –
For it is eaten by all beings, and eats all beings.*

*Food eats all beings? But of course, since all beings are food. *Ta-da!* Think about it. When animals and people die, their bodies become part of the earth. Plants grow out of the earth, and are eaten by animals and people. Food (or a being whose body is made of food) eats all beings (whose bodies have nourished the soil so that new food can grow) This is why there is so much reverence for food in Indian thought, and why we have traditionally been so reluctant to waste it or treat it casually. Food, we believe, is us, and our ancestors, and Brahman himself.

But hang on a minute – is your body really you? For the body changes every year, every day, every minute (approximately ninety-six million of your cells die every minute and ninety-six million new ones are added within the same time), but the person you think of as ‘you’ remains unchanged. Your memory, your intelligence, your awareness, tells you that the little baby in that cute photograph on the fridge is as much you as the toddler with the goofy grin in the family album, who is as much you as the fourth-grader with missing front teeth, who is as much you as the tenth-grader who was just voted captain of your house at school.

Let’s say, just for the sake of argument, that someone was in an accident and shattered a joint, which then had to be replaced with a metal one – would he still be he? Of course he would, even though his body has changed irrevocably. Do you see why, therefore, your *body* cannot be you? There is something else, clearly, that is the real you.

The Upanishad calls this first sheath, i.e., the ‘body sheath’ the ‘Annamaya Kosha’, or the food sheath. It is part of you, but since ‘you’ can see it and feel it and smell it, it cannot *be* you. The real you is the guy inside, the one seeing and feeling and smelling the body. The body is the object, not the subject. *You* – the experiencer and enjoyer of the body – are the subject. Therefore, you are not the body sheath.

So ignore the material* sheath, the Annamaya Kosha, for now, and let's go deeper.

*As explained earlier in the book, material simply means 'something that is made of matter'.

What keeps the body alive, apart from food? Why, it's the lifebreath, prana, without which the body is but inanimate matter! The next kosha, the next sheath, therefore, is the Pranamaya Kosha, the Sheath of the Lifebreath. The Taittiriya asks you to think of this sheath as also having the shape of your body, with different breaths taking on different shapes – Prana is the head, Vyana the right arm, Apana the left. It rests on the earth, this human-shaped Pranamaya Kosha, and is filled with space.

Breath, verily, is the life of all beings;
The gods live by it, as do men and beasts;
It is the true sign of life, the fount of vitality,
The soul of the body, the reason it is alive.
Worship the lifebreath as Brahman,
And you will be blessed, for it is indeed Him.

The lifebreath may be Brahman, but is it you? It is part of you, of course, but is it the person you refer to as you? Let's see. You can feel your breath, you can observe it if you try (during a pranayama session, for instance), and you can become conscious of it when you want to be, which means, once again, that your breath is the object – the observed – and not the subject, the observer. You, on the other hand, are the one looking at your breath – you are the observer, not the observed.

Plus, your breath is changing all the time – deep and long when you are calm, ragged when you are sad, shallow when you are stressed, quick and

short when you exercise. But the entity you think of as ‘you’ is the same, unchanging, constant, whether you are breathing in or out, whether you’re sprinting down the street, or in deep sleep. You, therefore, are not the lifebreath.

So ignore the vital* sheath, the Pranamaya Kosha, for now, and let’s go deeper.

*Vital simply means ‘to do with life’ or ‘needed for life’. It comes from the Latin root ‘vita’, which means life. Since the breath is needed for life, the Pranamaya Kosha is also called the vital sheath.

One thing that we have established during this search for the ‘real you’ is that the real you is aware, conscious, capable of thought. We have discovered that the body, which you *think* of as you, is not you, because of two reasons – (1) it changes, and (2) it is the observed, not the observer; the object, not the subject. Now we can add a third parameter to the list, which will determine what is really you and what isn’t. The third parameter is this: can the ‘you’ that you think of as you, think for itself? Both the body and the lifebreath fail the test of ‘Is this really me?’ on the third count as well – neither the Annamaya Kosha nor the Pranamaya Kosha can ‘think’. There is something else that is doing the thinking, and that is the mind. Let’s take a closer look at this mind sheath, then, the Manomaya Kosha.

Once again, says the Taittiriya, imagine it as having the shape of a man, with the Yajur Veda as the head (naturally, since the Taittiriya is part of the Yajur Veda, it considers this Veda the highest!), the Rig Veda as its right side and the Sama Veda as its left. The body of this man-shaped mind sheath is made up of knowledge, and it stands on the foundation of the Atharva Veda.

From Manas, all words return –
Brahman, verily, is Manas,

And he who knows Him as Manas knows no fear.

The mind may be Brahman, but is the mind – the intellectual part of you, the tool you use to make sense of the world around you – you? The Taittiriya declares that words return from this layer – i.e., we are able to interact with the external world in an intelligent, articulate way from this layer, which makes it far more powerful than the body sheath and the breath sheath. In fact, the mind sheath permeates both the body and the breath – it is the mind that directs both of them to do what they do. But to decide conclusively if the mind sheath is you, let's put it through our three-part test.

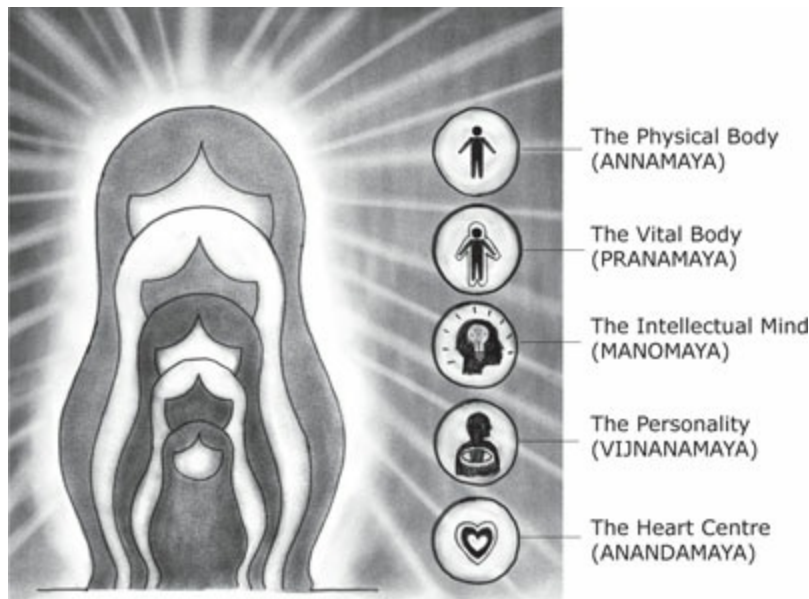
Can 'you' observe the workings of your mind? Of course you can. Therefore, the mind is an object, just like the body and the breath, not the subject. Does the mind change in its abilities? Of course it does. When you were younger, you did not understand physics as well as you do now, maybe, or maybe you've forgotten a language you spoke very well as a toddler. Therefore, it is not unchanging, while 'you' are. Can the mind think 'for itself'? Not really. It is influenced very much by what 'you' read or watch or feel. What have we got then? Epic fail on all three counts! Therefore, you are not the mind.

So ignore the mental* sheath, the Manomaya Kosha for now, and let's go deeper.

*Oh come on, you know what mental means!

The mind directs the body and the breath, but what is the mind directed and supported by? By *Understanding*, or *Intellect*, the part of you that takes in stimuli and information from the external world, processes it using the mind, analyzes how it feels about it, and decides, using its discernment, how to

react to it. This is the sheath of perception, emotion, intuition, discretion, of right and wrong, ethics and morality – the Vijnanamaya Kosha.



It is Intellect that conducts the sacrifice
And performs the rites;
It is Intellect that is venerated by the gods
As Brahman himself;
He who understands Brahman as the Intellect
Leaves all his sins behind
And attains all his wishes.

Intellect, understanding, perception and discretion are undoubtedly Brahman. They are the highest, most superior and most sophisticated of all the faculties. They are what make us human. But is your intellect really ‘you’? *Of course* it’s me, most of us would retort. *My feelings, my emotions, my opinions, my particular likes and dislikes, my sense of what is right and wrong, my unfounded phobias and my strongest beliefs, which together form my intellect, or are born of it – those are what make me me, right? Perhaps.*

But let's put that conviction to our three-part test right away.

Can you observe your feelings? Can you control your emotions? Of course you can, which means they are still objects to the subject called 'you'. Can you alter your understanding of something as new data comes in? Do you sometimes change your opinions based on what your group of friends believes? Yes and yes. That means understanding and perception are not constant or unchanging – unlike the Self called 'you', which is.

How? When you say 'I've changed', what are you really saying? You are saying, maybe, that your physical body has changed (maybe you've lost weight, or become more muscular) or that your ability to understand or learn something has changed (it's easier to learn, say, a new language, as a child rather than as an adult), or that your opinions or feelings or tastes have changed (you hated tomatoes as a child, but not any more; you used to look down upon people from a country or religion in the past, but no longer). You aren't really saying that 'you' have changed, are you? You are the same person you ever were! Fail again, on every count! You are most certainly not the Intellect.

But what else is there besides the body, the breath, the mind, and understanding, intelligence, emotion? What else could there be? Let's find out, shall we?

So ignore the intellectual sheath, the Vijnanamaya Kosha, for now, and let's go deeper, to find the Subject, the Self, Brahman himself, who illuminates all the other, outer sheaths.

{Pause here for a moment. Do you want to take a guess at what we may find when we go past the Sheath of Understanding? There's a clue in the name of this section!}

Where does true understanding come from? And wise, unbiased judgment? And integrity? Or, to reverse that, what is it that surfaces when you are at your most content – when you’ve finished a tough project that you have slaved over for days, say, or when you are immersed in learning a piece of music that you love deeply, or when your mindspace is speedily thinking up ideas for raising money for the kids of the construction workers who are building a new wing in your school? What is it that you experience, for a few fleeting moments or hours, when you are living so intently, intensely, in the moment that the world itself seems to fall away from around you, and you are not conscious of your body or breath or mind or intellect, when your thoughts are not jumping around like monkeys, and you feel a vast, all-embracing love for, or a complete detachment from, everything and everyone around you?

I feel joy, did you say? Delight, contentment, peace, love? If you are feeling any or all of these things at any point, says the Taittiriya, you have succeeded in shedding all the four sheaths we’ve talked about so far and entered the realm of Anandamaya Kosha, the spiritual Sheath of Bliss. When that happens, you see the world as it truly is, you understand that you are no different from anyone else, and that no one is any different from you, and you are able to see the way forward with crystal clarity, undistracted by your own emotions and feelings and prejudices.

The Sheath of Bliss also has the shape of a man, who has love as his head, joy as his right side and delight as his left side. His body is permeated with bliss, ananda – it is the heart of him, his very soul. And he stands, straight and tall and true, this man, on a foundation of ecstasy that is Brahman himself.

Know ye –

If a man denies Brahman, he denies himself,

If a man affirms Brahman, he affirms himself;

For he is Brahman, and Brahman is he.

The trouble is that it is extraordinarily difficult to ‘get’ to this state of bliss. For neither can your mind help you get there, nor your intellect. Even if you have arrived there by some fluke, the moment you put what you are feeling into words – ‘Ah! This is blissful!’ – you have analyzed your experience, which means you have moved away from the Anandamaya Kosha into the Vijnanamaya Kosha. You can’t even *notice* it, because that would mean it had been observed, and that the Manomaya Kosha had kicked in. Actually, it is beyond foolish even to seek it, because it isn’t the *object*, outside of yourself. It is the subject itself – you can’t *seek* bliss because you *are* bliss, you *are* love, you *are* joy – that, in fact, is your true nature, for that is the nature of Brahman himself. *That* is who you *really* are. Almost. (*Why ‘almost’? Find out on page 323.*)

Here’s what’s interesting, though. Each day, *every single day*, we each of us get to enjoy a brief and blissful few hours in the Anandamaya Kosha! No, seriously. Except, the sages say, it happens when we are in deep, dreamless, untroubled sleep, when we are no longer thinking of ourselves as separate or different from anyone or anything else, when ego, the sense of I, disappears, when body and mind and intellect subside into nothingness.

The only way to peel back the outer sheaths and get to the Bliss Sheath in the *conscious* state is to stop identifying yourself with your body, your mind, your desires, your feelings, your thoughts and your emotions.

Ha! Good luck with that!

Anuvaka 8 – The Ladder Of Bliss

How does one describe the great, grand joy that comes of realizing the Self, especially when so few have been there, done that? The Taittiriya comes up

with a cool ‘device’ – a bliss ladder!

Take a young man, a good young man who is well-read and well-built and strong. Imagine that the wealth of the whole world is his.

That is a single measure of human bliss.

A hundred measures of human bliss is as one measure of bliss for the gandharvas,

A hundred measures of gandharva bliss is as one measure of bliss for the pitris,

A hundred measures of pitr bliss is as one measure of bliss for the devas,

A hundred measures of deva bliss is as one measure of bliss for Indra,

A hundred measures of Indra bliss is as one measure of bliss for Brihaspati,

A hundred measures of Brihaspati bliss is as one measure of bliss for Prajapati,

A hundred measures of Prajapati bliss is as one measure of bliss for Brahman –

*Which is also the measure of bliss enjoyed by one who has realized the Self and is free of desire.**

*So how many times a measure of human bliss is a measure of Brahman-bliss? You do the math.

Wowzer! Sure, we are all a gazillion light-years away from attaining Brahma-bliss, but hey, a luscious carrot like this at least inspires one to try. No? What would you rather have then, the stick? ‘*If you do not work towards realizing the Self, the slaving Hounds of Hell will come after you, and when they find you – and they will – they will rip you limb from limb!*’? No, thanks!



BHRIGUVALLI – THE CREEPER OF BHRIGU

The Bhriguvalli tells the story of how the great sage Bhrigu, son of Varuna, discovered, through severe penances, the true nature of the self and the true nature of Brahman and the true nature of bliss. It contains ideas similar to those in the Brahmanandavalli, but also tells us, over and over, how important single-minded determination is to any great quest.

Anuvaka 1-6: How Bhrigu came to discover Brahman

Bhrigu went to his father, Varuna, and said to him, ‘Sir, teach me about Brahman.’

But Varuna, who was clearly not the kind of teacher who believed in spoon-feeding his students and certainly not the kind of parent who mollycoddled his children, sent him away with a flea in his ear.

‘Food, lifebreath, sight, hearing, mind, speech – first spend some time meditating on these things, learning about them,’ he said. ‘Think about where they come from, what they are sustained by, where they go when a man dies. That is Brahman. Come back to me when you have some answers.’

And Bhrigu, never one to cross his father, went away and did his penances, and discovered that food was indeed Brahman. From food all creatures are born, on food are they sustained, and into food they pass when they die.

But he wasn’t fully satisfied. So he went back to his father and said: ‘Sir, teach me about Brahman.’

‘Go and do your penances again,’ said Varuna, ‘and you will discover Him for yourself.’

So Bhrigu went away and did more penances, and discovered that Brahman was the lifebreath. From the lifebreath indeed were all creatures born, by lifebreath they were sustained, and to the lifebreath they returned

upon death.

But he wasn't entirely satisfied. So he went back to his father and said: 'Sir, teach me about Brahman.'

'Go and do your penances again,' said Varuna, 'and you will discover Him for yourself.'

And so it went on, over and over, until Bhrigu, through intense meditation and reflection, discovered that Brahman was not only food and lifebreath, but also mind, perception and bliss.

This is how Bhrigu realized the Self, and thus realized Brahman. Those who, like him, discover the Self for themselves,* will never lack for food. They will have offspring, fame, wealth, and the radiance that comes from sacred knowledge. So concludes the Taittiriya.

Aum Shantih Shantih Shantih ||

*Here, once again, is the Upanishadic insistence on self-study and self-discovery. You may have the greatest teacher in the world on your side – and make no mistake about it, you will need a good teacher to guide you in any pursuit you choose – but unless you put in the blood, sweat, toil and tears required, you will never get anywhere. The teacher is only a guide, the journey is entirely yours to make.

THE AFTERSTORY

Remember we talked about the five sheaths that conceal our true nature? There's a fun addendum to that story – according to the Taittiriya, even the Anandamaya Kosha is not our ultimate destination. After all, a sheath, by its very definition, covers or conceals something, which in this case is the truth. So what lies behind, beyond the final sheath?

0 = ∞ ?

The Anandamaya, in a manner of speaking, is the tiniest Matryoshka. And what do you find when you prise her two halves apart? Precisely! *Nothing*. Or, if you look at it another way, *Everything*, for the game is now over, and the secret has been revealed – there is no need to seek any more.

It's exactly the same with the Anandamaya Kosha. When it has been peeled back, say the sages of the Upanishads, what you are left with is Atman, or Pure Consciousness, your true Self, which does not judge, which is untainted by thoughts and actions, past and present, right and wrong, fear and pain, joy and peace. And *that* pure consciousness is both nothing and everything, which is why it is referred to both as Shoonya (nothingness) and Poorna (completeness).

Pretty cool, hanh?



AITAREYA

The Upanishad of the Glory of Being Human
In which we get to enjoy yet another story of how the
universe was created



Aum!

I pray

That my words make their home in my mind,

That my mind makes its home in my words,

That the knowledge of my true self reveals itself to me,

That my mind and my speech work in harmony to help me understand,

That I do not just hear the lesson, but understand it,

That what I learn and practise night and day is never lost to me.

May this Divine Truth that I speak today

Protect my teacher

And protect me.

Aum Shaantih Shaantih Shaantih ||

THE BACKSTORY

ver stood at the edge of a cliff after an exhausting climb uphill and, gazing at
the panorama of sky and land sprawling before you, thought to yourself,

E ‘How insignificant we humans are in this vastness, and yet, what airs we give ourselves!’? Ever sat on the seashore and, fixing your eyes on the faraway horizon where a shining sun is rising out of the water, painting the world a million shades of gold, whispered, ‘I am as a grain of sand on this beach, completely inconsequential to the business of the universe!’ Ever lay down beneath the upturned bowl of a night sky studded with stars, and exclaimed, overwhelmed and diminished by the size of the cosmos, ‘Who am I, after all? Just a small creature living “on an insignificant planet of a humdrum star lost in a galaxy tucked away in some forgotten corner of the universe in which there are far more galaxies than people”.* *Sighhh.*’?

Of course you have! And whoever was around you in each of those situations – friends, family, the random stranger you just befriended – probably nodded and *sighhhhed* along with you, shaking their heads at the incontestable truth of your words.

Well, you can thank your lucky stars none of the sages of the Upanishads were around you at that point. Had they been, they would have smacked you smartly on the head, shaken you hard, and ordered you to Stop.That.Sighhhh-ing.Right.Now!

For the Upanishads take entirely the opposite view of man’s place in the cosmos. In a hundred ways, in scores of different Upanishads, they proclaim the joyful truth that you are not insignificant, or irrelevant, or inconsequential to the cosmos. How can you be, they ask, when you *contain* the cosmos? How can you be, when you are the cosmos? You are Vaishvanara, the Universal Being, insist the Upanishads – embrace your bigness! You are Brahman, the Supreme Consciousness – acknowledge your greatness! When you look up at the night sky, don’t think of the stars as bigger or brighter, or different from you – breeeeathe them in, make them yours!

Did you think it was by diminishing yourself, or thinking of yourself as infinitesimal against the enormity of the universe – by being ‘humble’, in other words – that you became a better person? Perish the thought! For it is only when your sense of ‘I’ becomes big enough to include the whole universe, say the Upanishads, that you will truly respect every other creature and thing in it; only when you are able to see yourself in everything around you, will you realize that there isn’t, there can never be, anything vaster than you.

While other Upanishads bring home this truth in ways mystical and metaphorical, as part of a bunch of other things they are talking about, the Aitareya Upanishad makes the joyous celebration of being human its central theme, through yet another lovely story of creation. Packed to the gills with fantastic imagery and non-stop action, this story describes how the gods that animate, populate and hold up the cosmos came to be the exact same ones that animate, populate and hold up the human body – in other words, you.

The Aitareya is part of the oldest Veda, the Rig, and is therefore probably also part of the oldest group of Upanishads. The name Aitareya literally means ‘descendant of Itara’ – the sage Mahidasa, who is sometimes credited with composing this Upanishad, is also referred to as Aitareya, ‘descended from sage Itara’.

Enough with the backstory! Now let’s go find out how the universe was created!

*This is part of a quote by the brilliant and wise American scientist and astronomer Carl Sagan, his answer to the question ‘Who are we?’ But Sagan was far from dismissive about the significance of human life. Elsewhere, he has also said, ‘Every one of us is, in the cosmic perspective, precious. If a human disagrees with you, let him live. In a hundred billion galaxies, you will not find another.’

THE STORY

In the beginning, there was only the one, the Self, Atman. Nothing else, whatsoever, was. Nothing so much as blinked. And He thought to Himself, ‘Let me create the worlds.’

So He brought the worlds out of Himself – high-up Ambhas, realm of rain and floodwaters, supported by the sky; Marichi, realm of the glittering specks, stretching across the intermediate regions, brought to life each day by the rays of the sun; Mara, the earth, kingdom of the mortal; and beneath it, Apa, world of the waters.

Then he thought to himself, ‘Here are the worlds. Now I must create guardians for each.’ And from the waters, he drew out Purusha, the Person, gave him a shape and brooded him, like a hen broods her eggs to hatch them.

And from that man who had been brooded –

- A mouth opened. And from the mouth sprang speech, and from speech, fire.
- A pair of nostrils bloomed. And from the nostrils gushed breath, and from breath, air.
- Two eyes fluttered open. And from the eyes leapt sight, and from the light of sight, the sun.
- A pair of ears uncurled. And from the ears came hearing, and from hearing came the four directions of space, for sound to travel through.
- A swathe of skin unfurled. And out of the skin grew hair, and from hair, trees and plants.
- A heart blossomed. And from the heart came the mind, and from the mind, the moon.
- A navel popped. And from the navel proceeded the downward breath, Apana, and from that breath, death.
- A male part emerged. And from the male part came life-giving waters.

Once these gods – fire, air, sun, moon, space, water – were created, they all fell into the ocean here, the vast ocean of samsara. And the Self thought to himself, ‘I must infect them with hunger and thirst, for hunger and thirst are desire. Without desire, nothing will be created, no work will be done.’ And so he did.

Then those gods said to the Self, ‘Find us a body in which to live, so that we may eat and drink and work and play and satisfy our hunger and thirst. So the Self brought the body of a cow to them, but they shook their heads. ‘That will not do at all.’ Then the Self brought them the body of a horse, but they shook their heads. ‘That will not do at all.’ Then the Self brought them the body of a man and they exclaimed with joy, ‘Now that is what we call well made!’ For a man is indeed well made.

‘Go on, now,’ said the Self, ‘enter and establish yourselves in your respective dwellings.’ So –

- Fire became speech and entered the mouth.
- And air became breath and entered the nostrils.
- And the sun became sight and entered the eyes.
- And space became hearing and entered the ears.
- And the plants and trees became body hairs and entered the skin.
- And the moon became the mind and entered the heart.
- And death became the out-breath and entered the navel.
- And water became life-giving water and entered the male part.

Then hunger and thirst, who had been left behind, began to clamour, ‘Find us also a dwelling!’ And the Self said, ‘Oh, all right! You can live in the same dwelling as the deities and share in whatever they are offered.’ And that is why, to whichever deity man makes an offering – whether the deity is wealth or power or the spiritual life – hunger and thirst gobble it up, and

always want more.

Then the Self thought to himself, ‘Now here are the worlds, and here are the guardians of those worlds. Now I’d better create some food for them.’ So he brooded the waters like a hen broods her eggs, until something firm and solid emerged from it. And that something was food.

But no sooner was it created than it tried to run away, fearful of being eaten. And man, the first being with a body, tried to seize it, except he did not know how.

First he tried to seize it with speech. But that didn’t work. If it had, we would have been able to satisfy our hunger simply by talking about food. Oh well.

Then he tried to seize it with his breath. But that didn’t work. If it had, we would have been able to satisfy our hunger simply by smelling food. Oh well.

Then he tried to seize it with sight. But that didn’t work. If it had, we would have been able to satisfy our hunger simply by looking at food. Oh well.

Then he tried to seize it with hearing. But that didn’t work. If it had, we would have been able to satisfy our hunger simply by hearing about food. Oh well.



Then he tried to seize it with the skin. But that didn't work. If it had, we would have been able to satisfy our hunger simply by touching food. Oh well.

Then he tried to seize it with his mind. But that didn't work. If it had, we would have been able to satisfy our hunger simply by thinking about food. Oh well.

Then he tried to seize it with Apana, the downward breath of digestion. And he succeeded! For it is truly the digestive breath that seizes food for the body, and it is the digestive breath that is nourished by food.

Then the Self thought to himself, 'How will all this carry on without me? The city of the body needs a lord to enjoy the doings of the body. I must stick around!' And he thought to himself, 'How shall I enter this man? Which shall be my dwelling?' And he thought to himself, 'If speaking is done through speech and breathing through breath, if seeing is done through sight and hearing through hearing, if feeling is done through skin and thinking is done using the mind, then who am I? What is my function?'

The Self split the man's head along its birth fissure, closed since babyhood, and entered, finding three abodes for himself, which are the three states of consciousness – the waking state, the dreaming state, and the deep-sleep state.

When he came to life inside the body, the Self looked around to see if there was anyone else there. But he only saw the One, Brahman, and no one else, and cried, '*Idam aadarsham iti* – I have seen this!'

Therefore He is called Idandra, he who sees. But the gods call him Indra, he who lies beyond the senses. Because the gods like being cryptic like that.

Don't you love those little snarky asides the sages throw in, like the very last line above? The only thing missing at the end of it is an eye-roll emoji. The line is completely unnecessary to the story, but the storyteller was probably annoyed with the inscrutable ways of the gods that day, so he decided to get his own back. These little side jokes are also a great way for the sage to connect with his audience – suddenly, he loses that intimidating halo and becomes one of them.

Also, did you notice that the storyteller does not reveal what the Self decided its function would be? He tells us how the Self entered the body and where it chose to live and what it saw when it first became conscious inside the body, but he doesn't reveal the most important part – the Self's function. He saves that for the end of the Upanishad. But before that, he inserts a little instructional note on the 'three births' of the Self. Read on to find out what they are.

Life begins in a man's body, strong, swift, gathered from the vitality of his

limbs. It is the Self, indeed, that bears the Self. This is the Self's first birth.

When man releases life into woman, a new life begins. This is the Self's second birth.

The mother nourishes the child in her womb, as the life of her life, breath of her breath; that's why she should herself be nourished. This is the father's responsibility, and he fulfils it, remembering that it is his own Self he is nourishing. Thus is the world kept going. In time, the child emerges from the mother's body. This is the Self's third birth.

The child grows, taking the place of his father, adding to the good deeds of the father, continuing his work in the world. And this goes on, over and over, across generations – first the father becomes the son, then the son becomes the father. Thus is the world kept going.

And now for the big reveal – what function did the Self choose for itself in the human body?

'Who is this Self, anyway? Who is the one we venerate here?

Is it the one which helps us see? Is it the one which helps us hear? Is it the one which helps us smell, taste? Is it that which makes speech possible? Is it the heart and the mind? Is it thought and desire? Is it Awareness? Perception? Insight? Intuition? Understanding? Cognition? Purpose? Memory? Intention? Impulse? Control? But these are all just different names of Intelligence, they are all only servants of the Self.

This Self is Brahman, it is the primordial father Prajapati, it is all the gods. It is the five immense beings – earth, wind, space, the waters, light. It is all creatures great and small – born of eggs, born of wombs, born of sweat, born from sprouts; it is horses, elephants, cows and men; it is all beings that walk, and all beings that fly, and all beings that neither walk nor fly.'*******

*Born of sweat? Yup. Sometimes these sweat-born creatures were also described as being born of heat, or moisture, but since a combination of heat and moisture is sweat, that word covers all the bases. What are these creatures born of sweat and heat and moisture, though? All kinds of creepy-crawlies – mosquitoes, lice, ticks, mites and bugs that come out of nowhere (or so it seemed to the ancients)! Now we know that mosquitoes are born from eggs, but those eggs are laid, and hatch, in standing water, especially in the hot summer months. In that sense, the ancients were not too far off the mark.

**In other words, plants and trees. Rocks and metals don't fit into this category, because they are not living, breathing creatures. Even non-living things are believed to carry the essence of Brahman, but in them, it is dormant, pure potential energy, which cannot become kinetic energy without external help.

The Self is Prajna, Knowledge. Prajna guides all, sees all, is the foundation of all else. Prajna is the eye of the world; on Prajna is the world supported.

Prajnanam (say praj-naa-nam) Brahma. Knowledge is God.

Those who realize this truth live in joy, and go beyond death.

Aum Shaantih Shaantih Shaantih ||

THE AFTERSTORY

Afterstory 1: The Small Matter of the Mechanics of Rebirth

So you know now, after reading the Aitareya Upanishad, that the Self is believed to have three births – the first happens when a soul finds its way into a man's body, the second when a baby is created, and the third when the baby is born.

Ever wondered how the first birth of the Self happens? What are the actual mechanics involved in rebirth? How does a soul enter a man's body? Are millions of souls floating around us as disembodied spirits, waiting for a man to lower his guard so that one of them can sneak into his body, fighting off all other souls who have the exact same idea?

There could be a million theories, but one of the most popular in Hinduism is a fascinating one, involving the water cycle, photosynthesis,

digestion of food in the body, the assimilation of food, and a lot more. Here's how it goes.

When the body dies, the soul leaves for the heavenly realms, where it has a great time until the credit in its good Karma account drops to zero and it is forced to fall back into the sea of samsara. It does this 'falling back' in a literal way, seeding itself into a cloud and dropping to the earth as rain. The rain seeps into the soil, and rises as sap in plants, taking the soul along with it. Nourished by water and sunshine, the plant, the only being that can manufacture its own food, grows and matures, creating leaves and fruit and seed for other less capable creatures (less capable in terms of being able to manufacture their own food, that is), to enjoy and grow strong on.



When a man eats a plant (or eats the meat of a herbivore that has feasted on plants, or eats the meat of a carnivore that has feasted on herbivores), the sap enters his body, where it is digested and assimilated. Part of the assimilated food – including, most importantly, the soul part – becomes all-powerful, life-giving water, 'drawn from the vitality of his limbs'. When the seed in a woman is nourished, a new life begins. Nine months later, a baby is born.

Hurray! The soul has successfully made its way back into a freshly minted human body!

Afterstory 2: Spot the Mahavakya – Part 2!

Yup, there's a Mahavakya in the Aitareya as well! And yes, it is indeed *Prajnanam Brahma* – Knowledge is Brahman. This is the Mahavakya of the Rig.

And what kind of knowledge are they talking about here? Not the information you get out of books, not the skills required to make or destroy things, but 'true' knowledge, the kind that is a combination of intelligence, instinct, intuition, wisdom and the empathy that allows you to sense someone's feelings even before they have been expressed, apart from the deep-in-your-gut understanding that you, like everyone else, carry the essence of the Supreme Energy that makes the universe possible.

PS: Maybe that's why, when you understand someone else's emotions or intentions without any words being spoken, it is called 'divining' – for e.g., 'She divined from his body language that the news was not good'. See?



CHANDOGYA

The Upanishad of the Sacred Metre

In which, through Shvetaketu, we discover who we
really are



Aum!

I seek blessings

That my limbs, speech, breath, eyes, ears, strength

And all my senses, be nourished;

I pray

That I may never deny Brahman or be disloyal,

That Brahman may never forsake or reject me;

I, the seeker, ask

That all the wisdoms of the Upanishads

Shine in me,

That they all shine in me.

Aum Shaantih Shaantih Shaantih ||

THE BACKSTORY

Remember when we talked about the different rhythmic structures, or metres, of the Vedic shlokas, in Chapter 4? Remember what ‘metre’ is called in

R Sanskrit?

That's right – chanda!

And since the ninth Mukhya Upanishad is (1) part of the musical Sama Veda; (2) written in lilting rhythmic verse that has a musical quality to it even when it is simply recited; and (3) talks so extensively about speech, words, chants, language and sound, the ancient seers felt it was appropriate to name it the Chandogya Upanishad – the Upanishad of the Sacred Metre.

The Chandogya is considered one of the oldest Upanishads, and it is certainly one of the longest – only the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad, which occupies the tenth position in Adi Shankara's list of the ten Principal Upanishads, beats it in length. With eight lectures (or 'prapaathakas'), each comprising several volumes of verses, the Chandogya can seem highly intimidating, especially because there is no single theme to bind it all. Most scholars agree that the eight chapters are a motley collection of works by different authors, which have been compiled into one Upanishad by some wise person who felt that they belonged together. Despite that, however, it is considered a most important Upanishad – Shankara himself, in his commentaries on all ten main Upanishads, referred to this one more times (810!) than he did any other Upanishad!

What are the main themes of the Chandogya? One big theme is the significance of that most sacred of sounds, the High Chant, the Udgitha – otherwise known as Aum. Another is the perennial question of where the universe comes from, what it is made of and what its driving principle is (Ans: Brahman, Brahman, and Brahman.) And the third, of course, is the core question of the Upanishads – Who am I, really? (Ans: Why, you're Brahman, of course!)

In the Chandogya, these themes are explored both through mystical metaphors (complex and hard to figure out) and through stories (far easier to

understand). The metaphors are best left for another, more advanced reading of the Upanishad, and there isn't enough room in this book to explore all the stories, but two especially lovely stories must be told. One is the story of Satyakama, the other of Shvetaketu – both of them young, both eager as heck to find the answers to the mysteries of the mind and the universe, and willing to work hard for it, but otherwise worlds apart from each other.

Ready to hear their stories? Let's go!

THE STORY

PRAPAATHAKA 4

Mother is the necessity of invention: The Story of Satyakama

Satyakama lived with his mother Jabala (say ja-baa-laa) in a village at the edge of a forest. Like everyone else in the village, he had heard of the great sage Gautama, who taught students in his gurukul somewhere deep inside the forest. All of Satyakama's friends were happy enough living their small, circumscribed lives – tending to the cows, swimming in the village pool, playing with the other boys and generally raising hell when they felt like it – but Satyakama, who was about twelve, had always been curious and deeply introspective by nature, and dreamed of bigger things.

One night, he was lying down with his head in his mother's lap, when the desire to do something more with his life came upon him like a flood. 'Mother,' he said, sitting up, 'I would dearly like to study the Vedas at Rishi Gautama's gurukul. But I hear one of the first questions gurus ask, before they accept you as a student, is who your father is. So tell me, mother – who is my father?'



Jabala baulked. This was one question she had hoped she would never be forced to answer. She looked into her little boy's eager face and wished he didn't have these big, impossible dreams – everyone knew teachers of the Vedas only accepted brahmin, kshatriya and vaishya students, and she couldn't be sure at all that Satyakama's father had belonged to one of those varnas.

For a brief instant, Jabala considered lying to her son, creating a rosy backstory about a fond brahmin father – life would be so much easier for him if he, and everyone else, believed that. But she rejected the idea almost immediately. He was such a good, honest child – how could she, who had spent all these years raising him to be just such a one, now ask him to base his future on a lie? No, she would simply place before him the bald, unadorned truth and hope that he – and she! – could deal with the rejection that the world was sure to heap upon him.

‘I don’t know who your father is, Satyakama,’ she said. And cupping the suddenly worried face in her hands, continued, ‘But no one can deny that I am your mother, and that my name is Jabala. So when the teacher asks, tell him what I told you and tell him also that your name, therefore, is Satyakama Jaabaala.’

The next morning, a cheerful Satyakama set off for Rishi Gautama’s gurukul. Jabala watched him go, her heart in her mouth, praying that the guru would find it in his heart to let her boy down gently. When he got to the ashram, Satyakama bowed before Gautama and said, in a high, clear voice, ‘Sir, I want, more than anything, to live with you and be taught the scriptures. Please do me the honour of accepting me as your student.’

Gautama beamed. Such eagerness in one so young, such clarity about goals, was rare – it was usually the parent who was chafing at the bit, wanting his ward to be accepted at the gurukul. ‘What is your lineage, saumya?’ he asked. ‘Who is your father, and your grandfather before him?’

‘Now *that* I’m afraid I do not know, sir,’ said Satyakama, whose name means ‘one who hankers after nothing but the truth’. ‘When I asked my mother, this is what she said: “I do not know who your father is. But no one can deny that I am your mother, and that my name is Jabala.” And so, sir, my name is Satyakama Jaabaala.’

Gautama was overwhelmed. ‘None but a brahmin would speak the truth so fearlessly!’ he declared joyously. ‘Fetch the firewood quickly, my boy, and let us begin.’

After Satyakama had been initiated, Gautama picked out 400 of the feeblest and skinniest of his cows and handed them to his newest acolyte. ‘You are now responsible for their care,’ he said. ‘Look after them well.’

‘Of course, sir,’ said Satyakama, thinking to himself, ‘I will not return,

sir, until I have swelled this herd to a thousand healthy cows.’ And he drove the cows into that part of the forest where the grass was sweetest and most plentiful, and threw himself into their care.

Years rolled by. Satyakama was blissfully happy in the lap of nature. He spent his days looking after the cows, and his evenings in quiet contemplation. One afternoon, when he was dozing under a tree, Satyakama was awakened by a voice calling his name. It was the bull.

‘Satyakama,’ said the bull, who was really the god of the air, Vayu, ‘you have succeeded in your endeavour, saumya. We are now a thousand. Take us back to the teacher’s house.’

‘I will, Bhagavan,’ said Satyakama.

But the bull wasn’t done speaking. ‘You have taken such good care of us, and that kind of love and dedication needs to be rewarded. Let me tell you what I know about Brahman, although that is only a quarter of what Brahman really is, just one of his four feet.’

‘Thank you, Bhagavan,’ said a grateful Satyakama.

‘Listen, then,’ said the bull. ‘There are four directions – east, west, north and south – and these form one foot of Brahman, called Prakashavan (say prakasha-vaan), the Shining. Understand that Brahman rules every direction, and you will become the ruler of far-flung worlds, and shine in this one.’



Satyakama bowed.

‘When the time comes,’ said the bull as it moved back into the herd, ‘the fire will tell you about another quarter, another foot, of Brahman.’

The next morning, Satyakama began to drive the herd back to Gautama. That night, he penned the cows, lit a fire and sat next to it, warming himself, when he heard a voice call his name. It was the fire, which had suddenly blazed up.

‘Satyakama,’ said the fire, who was really the god Agni, ‘Let me tell you, saumya, about another quarter of Brahman.’



‘I am all ears, Bhagavan.’

‘Listen then,’ said the fire. ‘The earth, the sky, the space between the two, and the ocean form the second foot of Brahman, called Anantavan (say ananta-vaan) the Endless. Understand that Brahman is all of these, and meditate upon them as Brahman, and you will win worlds unlimited, and become boundless in this one.’

Satyakama bowed.

‘When the time comes,’ said the fire, as it withdrew into itself, ‘the swan will tell you about another quarter, another foot, of Brahman.’

The whole of the next day, Satyakama drove the herd further towards Gautama. That night, he penned the cows, lit a fire and sat next to it, warming

himself, when he heard a voice call his name from somewhere above him. He tilted his head to look, and a swan flew down to him.

‘Satyakama,’ said the swan, who was really the sun god Aditya, ‘Let me tell you, saumya, about another quarter of Brahman, about his third foot.’



‘I cannot wait, Bhagavan.’

‘Listen then,’ said the swan. ‘The sun, the moon, the fire and the lightning form the four quarters of the third foot of Brahman, called Jyotishman (say jyotish-maan), the Luminous. Revere these four as Brahman, and you will win luminous worlds, and be radiant in this one.’

Satyakama bowed.

‘When the time comes,’ said the swan, as it rose into the air, ‘a diver bird will tell you about the last quarter, the fourth paada, of Brahman.’

The whole of the next day, Satyakama drove the herd further towards Gautama’s ashram. That night, he penned the cows, lit a fire and sat next to it, warming himself, when he heard a voice call his name from somewhere above him. He tilted his head to look, and a diver bird flew down to him.

‘Satyakama,’ said the diver bird, who was really the lifebreath, Prana, ‘Let me tell you, saumya, about the last quarter of Brahman.’

‘I am overwhelmed with gratitude, Bhagavan.’

‘Listen then,’ said the diver bird, ‘The breath, the eye, the ear and the mind are the four quarters of the fourth foot of Brahman, called Ayatanavan (say aa-yata-na-vaan), the Enduring. Know that all these are none but him, and meditate upon them with reverence and devotion, and you will win

worlds enduring, and endure eternally in this one.'

Satyakama bowed.

The next morning, he drove the herd the final short distance to his guru's home.

'Satyakama,' said Gautama.

'Bhagavan,' bowed Satyakama.

'Saumya,' exclaimed the teacher, 'you verily shine with the knowledge of Brahman! Who taught you?'

'No human, sir,' smiled Satyakama. 'It was the bull, the fire, the swan and the diver bird. But I will not be content until I hear it from you. Please, Bhagavan, do me the honour of teaching me about Brahman, for I have heard that knowledge learnt from a guru best helps the student gain worlds that are far-flung, unlimited, luminous and everlasting.'

Then Gautama taught Satyakama everything he knew, leaving nothing out, yea, leaving nothing out.

As you can see, there are two distinct parts to this story. The first part is about Rishi Gautama accepting Satyakama as his disciple, and the second is about Satyakama learning about Brahman from the birds and the beasts. While both parts have lessons for us, the first part carries a far more important truth.

From all we have read about the gurukuls of the Vedic age, we know that there were very strict rules of eligibility for students – they had to be male (in most cases), and they had to belong to the brahmin, kshatriya or vaishya varna. Why the story of Satyakama is so important is that it reveals, in very clear, simple prose, that while those rules existed, they were not altogether inflexible – when an evolved guru who truly understood the spirit of the

scriptures came across a prospective student who displayed honesty, courage, dedication and a passion for learning, he could, and often did, choose to disregard the rules.*

*And that's a great lesson to take away from the Upanishads. Rules are meant to be followed, of course, but since rules are made by humans, to suit a particular time, place and culture, it is our responsibility as thinking individuals to re-examine them from time to time, and to challenge, tweak or change them when they seem unfair, unsuitable or no longer relevant.

Satyakama, we are told, was the son of the maid Jabala, who was in a profession that involved manual labour. In other words, she was a shudra by occupation. But a boy's lineage was traced through his father's varna, not his mother's, so if Satyakama's father had belonged to one of the other three varnas, he still stood a chance of being accepted. Not knowing what caste your father belonged to, or even who he was, was a far worse social sin than knowing that he was a shudra.

And yet, and yet, Gautama accepted Satyakama as a student. In the story, he justifies his action by declaring that 'no one but a brahmin' would have spoken an inconvenient truth so fearlessly. In saying this, Gautama, and through him, the authors of the Chandogya, are echoing what Krishna declared so unequivocally to Arjuna in a famous shloka in the Bhagavad Gita – *it is neither birth nor occupation, Arjuna, that determines a man's varna, but his nature.* (More correctly, it is Krishna who echoes Gautama in the Gita – the Gita is the condensed version of all Upanishadic wisdom and was composed well after the early Upanishads).

Krishna goes on to explain this further. Those who are calm and compassionate, possess great self-control and self-discipline, make no distinction between people, and are role models to everyone around them in knowing the right thing to do in every situation – such men and women (and boys and girls), reveals Krishna, never mind the family they are born into, are

brahmin by nature. Knights in shining armour who plunge into the battlefield at every given opportunity, defending what is right, fearlessly leading heroic campaigns against all manner of unfairness and injustice, never turning their backs on the good fight – whether it is against a bully in the playground, a law that doesn't honour the country's Constitution, or animal cruelty – such people are kshatriya by nature. Those who are willing to brave the heat and dust of the marketplace to create and sell the products and services that society needs to function, thus keeping the wheels of trade and economy turning – such people are vaishya by nature. And those happy cogs in the wheel who want to be neither thinkers nor activists nor entrepreneurs, but are content executing work and giving their best to the job at hand with no desire for personal glory – such people are shudra by nature.*

*By Krishna's classification, which 'nature-category' do you think you most identify with? Of course it is entirely possible that you have bits of all four in you, but some self-reflection will reveal which one is most dominant in your nature. This is important to know, for acting according to one's nature (i.e., staying true to yourself) is, according to the Gita, one of the vital keys to happiness.

In Part 2 of the Satyakama story, we are told that Satyakama was taught about Brahman not by humans but by the birds and the beasts and the elements. What can we take away from this? That we discover more about ourselves and the universe when we spend quiet time by and with ourselves, preferably around trees and animals? Perhaps.

And while lessons from trees and animals may be difficult to arrange at short notice, be sure to put aside some time each day for quiet contemplation. Maybe you can reflect about your day, all the things you have to be grateful for, all the things you did today that you would have done differently if you could have another chance, and all the things you will do better tomorrow. At the end of a week or two, evaluate what that quiet time by yourself has done for you – has it helped you discover more about yourself? Do you feel

calmer, more grateful, more in control of each day?

Yes? Great! Stick at it, and one day, while you're walking along the street, as happy as a clam, you might hear a koel calling your name!

And what of Satyakama's belief that his knowledge of Brahman would not be complete unless he had been taught it by a 'proper' teacher? Think of it this way. Sure you can learn to play the guitar using all the lovely video tutorials that people put up on YouTube, but once you have learnt the basic chords, would your skills be enhanced far more quickly if you had a few one-on-one sessions with a good teacher? What do you think?



PRAPAATHAKA 6

Tat Tvam Asi – **The Story of Shvetaketu**

When Shvetaketu, the beloved son of the sage Uddalaka Aruni, was of age, his father said to him, 'There has never been a one in our family, saumya, who was a brahmin only by birth. They were all of them well versed in the scriptures, and so should you be.'

So Shvetaketu went away to a gurukul to be educated, and when he came back to his father's house twelve years later, he had grown into a handsome (and somewhat conceited) young man, with self-assured (and somewhat arrogant) eyes, and more than a hint of a swagger, for he thought himself a master of the Vedas.

Deciding that his son needed taking down a peg or two, Uddalaka said to him: 'Welcome home, son! Congratulations on completing your education! You are now familiar with that wisdom, I hope, by which you can hear the unheard, think the unthought and know the unknown?'

'Eh?' Shvetaketu was taken aback. His shoulders slumped a little and his

arrogance retreated. ‘I thought I had learnt a lot and discovered a lot these past dozen years, sir, but I’m afraid I am not familiar with the wisdom to which you refer. Perhaps it is best that you teach it to me.’ And he sat at his father’s feet, his face upturned and eager, and it was as if twelve years had rolled away in an instant.

‘I will tell you, my son,’ said Uddalaka. ‘It is like this. If you know well the essence of something, you will “know” everything that carries that essence, even if it takes on a hundred different forms that bear a thousand different names.’

Shvetaketu was puzzled.

‘It is like this, saumya. By knowing a lump of clay – its texture, its feel, how it moves on a wheel or in your hand – you understand intimately everything that is fashioned out of it, even if you have never seen those different forms or known their names, for their true reality is not their forms, or their names, but their essence, which is clay.’

Shvetaketu’s face cleared a little. He nodded.

‘It is like this, saumya. By knowing just one trinket made of copper, one knows and understands everything else made of copper, for everything else is just a name, just a form, whose true reality is copper.

‘It is like this, saumya. By observing closely just one pair of nail-clippers made of iron, one understands everything else made of iron, for while we may give iron different names and forms, we know the underlying reality of all those forms and names is just this: iron.

‘It is like this, saumya. By understanding the one true reality of the universe, you understand every other thing in the universe, never mind that it is present in a million different forms with a billion different names.’

Shvetaketu sat up straighter. ‘That makes a lot of sense, Father. But all those wise men who taught me all these years never taught me about this one

supreme reality, the one universal essence, by understanding which everything in the universe may be understood. Please do teach it to me, sir!’

‘Very well, saumya. Listen carefully now.

‘In the beginning, there was only Being, and only that, without a second. Now, some people will tell you that in the beginning, there was only *Non-Being*, and only that, without a second. But that theory has always seemed flawed to me, for how can all this Being that we see around us emerge from Non-Being? How can anything emerge from Non-Being? I prefer to think of Being – not Non-Being – as the first.’

‘I agree,’ said Shvetaketu.

‘Now this Being said to itself, “Come now, let me become many.” And it began to emit heat, which is essential for life. And the heat, not to be outdone, thought to itself – “Now let me become many. Let me propagate myself.” And the heat produced water, which is essential for life. (And that’s why, when a man feels hot, he sweats, and when he feels stressed, he weeps, for heat emits water.)

‘Now the water, not a one to sit around quietly twiddling its thumbs, thought to itself – “Let me become many.” And out of water came food. (And that’s why, when it rains, there is no shortage of food.)

‘Now look around you, Shvetaketu, at all the creatures in the universe. All of them are only born in three ways – from sprouts, from eggs and from creatures. And the Divine Being thought to itself, “Let me infuse life into these three – sprouts, eggs and creatures.”

‘That life-essence, Shvetaketu, combined with heat, water and food in a million different ways to produce a million different manifestations of the original Being. There is nothing in the universe that isn’t a mix of these!

‘Realizing this, the ancient sages were well pleased, and said to themselves, “Now nothing in the world, however new and different it looks,

can surprise us, for we know that it is made only of these three – heat, water, food – and we know that its life-essence is the essence of the one original Being. Truly, there is nothing else.”

Shvetaketu was struck with wonder. ‘Really? Then tell me, father, how do these three divinities – heat, water and food – manifest in my body and in yours? Which part of my body is heat, father? Which part water? Which part food? Tell me, sir, for I must know.’

‘Very well,’ said Uddalaka. ‘Now listen. All the food that you eat splits into three parts. The densest part passes out of the body, the not-so-dense part becomes flesh, and the lightest, airiest portion becomes the mind.

‘All the water that you drink splits into three parts. The most viscous part passes out of the body, the less viscous part becomes blood, and the lightest, airiest part rises in the body and becomes the breath.

‘All the heat that you eat* splits into three – the coarsest becomes bone, the not-so-coarse portion marrow and the lightest, airiest part becomes speech.

*‘Heat that you eat’ translates to food like oil and ghee, which are produced by the application of heat – to oilseeds in the case of oil and to butter in the case of ghee. It also translates to the heat of the sun, which we ‘eat’ through our skin, and which, modern science tells us, provides the body with vitamin D, important for building bones. Which is exactly what the Chandogya says the ‘heat that we eat’ turns into!

‘Thus, saumya, does everything consist of three elements and every element consist of three parts. Thus is the mind made of food, the breath of water and speech of heat.’

‘How are you so sure of this, sir?’ asked Shvetaketu. ‘Tell me, please, for it is fascinating what you say, that mind is made of food, breath of water and speech of heat.’

‘Go away for fifteen days and eat nothing in that period,’ said Uddalaka. ‘But be sure to drink water, for the breath is made of water and will be cut off

if you don't drink.'

So Shvetaketu went away for fifteen days, during which he drank only water. When he came back, he was pale and wan, and much reduced in appearance, but he was very much alive.

His father welcomed him and said: 'Now recite to me the verses of the Rig, my son, and the verses of the Yajur, and the chants of the Sama.'

'I don't recall them, sir,' said Shvetaketu wonderingly, his voice unable to rise above a whisper. 'I studied them for twelve years, but cannot recall a word.'

'And no wonder,' chuckled Uddalaka, 'for the mind is made of food and you have eaten nothing for fifteen days. Just as, in a barely-there fire, a tiny ember the size of a firefly blazes up again when covered with straw, thus will your mind be revived when you fan the small spark of your breath with food. And the heat the food produces will revive your tongue and allow speech to flow. Go and eat your fill now, and come back to me.'

And of course, when Shvetaketu returned, he recalled all the verses of the Rig and the Yajur and the chants of the Sama, and was able to recite them to his father in a strong, full voice. And he understood that the mind is indeed made of food, and the breath indeed of water, and speech indeed of heat.

'Tell me more, sir, teach me more.'

'So be it, saumya,' said Uddalaka.

'Learn from me what really happens in sleep. In the waking state, saumya, the mind is like a tethered bird, flying hither and thither in a rare frenzy, never finding rest. When sleep comes, just as the fettered bird returns to her perch, the mind-bird, exhausted by all the frenetic activity, returns to its true resting place, to its purest state, to breath itself, for the mind is bound to the breath. And that's why, when a man is in deep sleep, they say that he has returned unto himself.

‘Now learn from me what it means when they say a man is hungry. It means that water has led away all the food he has previously eaten to various parts of his body. And when they say a man is thirsty, it means heat has led away all the water he has earlier drunk. And thus we know that the root of the body is food, and the root of food is water, and the root of water is heat. And the root of heat is of course that original Being from whence heat first sprang.

‘Now learn from me what it means when they say a man is dead. It is speech that goes first, merging into the mind – so that even when his voice is weak, a man is able to think and recognize and remember and understand. Then the mind goes, merging into the prana or life-breath – so that even when a man does not understand any more, he is able to breathe and thus stay alive. Then the life-breath goes, merging into heat. Very soon after, heat leaves, merging into the same Pure Being from whence it came.

‘And it is that Pure Being that is the root, the finest essence, of all there is. That is the truth of the universe, the only real there is. And that, *the very same That*, Shvetaketu, is your essence too. That, dear one, is who you are.

‘That Thou Art, Shvetaketu, *Tat Tvam Asi!*’

Shvetaketu’s hair stood on end as the tremendous revelation crashed into his consciousness like a storm crashes into the coast. The essence of his being, the thing that made him *him*, was no different, apparently, from the essence of the universe! The same energy that allowed him to think and understand and remember and imagine and speak also caused the sun and the stars to shine and the seas to rise and the rain to fall. He, Shvetaketu, contained within him the power of the cosmos!

‘Tell me more, sir,’ cried Shvetaketu, ‘teach me more!’

‘So be it, saumya,’ said Uddalaka.

‘Now consider the bees that gather nectar all day from a variety of different flowers and turn them into golden honey. Once the honey is ready,

the different nectars are no longer able to say, “I am the nectar of this flower”, or “I was gathered from that flower”, for their individual sweetnesses have now merged into a homogeneous, delicious whole. In the same way, son, do all the individual, separate, different existences you see around you – be it tiger or wolf, boar or lion, worm or moth, gnat or mosquito – merge into pure Being. That is what they all become, when they pass from their physical bodies, with no memory of ever having been separate or different from each other.

‘That is the Self, the Atman, of the world. That is the finest, most subtle essence of everything, the soul of everything, the root of everything, the scaffolding on which everything else stands. That is the true. That is the real. And That is *your* Self, *your* Atman, too.

‘That Thou Art, Shvetaketu, *Tat Tvam Asi!*’

‘**T**ell me more, sir,’ cried Shvetaketu, ‘teach me more!’
‘So be it, saumya,’ said Uddalaka.

‘Now consider the rivers that flow into the sea. Some rivers flow eastwards, into the eastern sea. And some flow west, into the western sea. But all the seas flow into each other. Once the rivers have become the sea, they are no longer able to say, “I am this river” or “I am that river”, for their individual waters have now merged into the only ocean there is. It is from this very ocean that the rivers were born, although they do not know it, and it is into this ocean that they eventually return. In the same way do tiger and wolf, boar and lion, worm and moth, gnat and mosquito emerge from the one Being, although they do not realize it, and return to it when their time here is done.

‘That is the Self, the Atman, of the world. That is the finest, most subtle essence of everything, the soul of everything, the root of everything, the scaffolding on which everything else stands. That is the true. That is the real.

And That is *your* Self, *your* Atman, too.

‘That Thou Art, Shvetaketu, *Tat Tvam Asi!*’

‘**T**ell me more, sir,’ cried Shvetaketu, ‘teach me more!’
‘So be it, saumya,’ said Uddalaka.

‘Now consider this huge tree here, son. If someone should hack away at its bottom, living sap would flow out of it. If someone should hack away at its middle, living sap would flow out of it. If someone should hack away at it close to the top, once again, living sap would flow. You see how jiva, the life-essence, pervades the entire tree? And that’s why, even though the sap flows out of it on hacking, the tree itself does not die – it stands straight and tall, thriving in its soil, nourishing itself with water. But should that life-essence withdraw from a single leaf, saumya, that leaf is instantly as good as dead. It withers and falls, never to rise again. Should that life-essence leave a branch of the tree, that branch withers instantly. And should the Self leave the entire tree, this tree, huge as it is, vibrantly alive as it is in this moment, will instantly begin to wither away.



‘Do you see how this works, Shvetaketu? As with the tree, so it is with us. The body dies when the living Self leaves it, certainly, but the Self itself does not die.

‘It is that living Self, the life-essence, that is the Self, Atman, of the world. That is the finest, most subtle essence of everything, the soul of everything, the root of everything, the scaffolding on which everything else stands. That is the true. That is the real. And That is *your* Self, your Atman, too.

‘That Thou Art, Shvetaketu, *Tat Tvam Asi!*’

‘**T**ell me more, sir,’ cried Shvetaketu, ‘teach me more!’
‘So be it, saumya,’ said Uddalaka.
‘Now bring me the fruit of a nyagrodha* tree.’

*A giant, spreading fig tree, referred to several times in both Buddhist and Hindu scriptures and mythology. It is usually identified with the banyan, *Ficus benghalensis*.

‘Here it is, sir.’

‘Break it.’

‘I have done so, sir.’

‘What do you see inside?’

‘Some tiny seeds, sir.’

‘Cut up one of the seeds.’

‘I have done so, sir.’

‘What do you see inside?’

‘I see nothing at all, sir.’

‘Know this, saumya, that “nothing”, which you cannot see, it is from that “nothing” that the giant nyagrodha grows, it is because of that “nothing” that it exists at all.

‘It is that “nothing”, saumya, believe me, that is the Self, Atman, of the

world. That is the finest, most subtle essence of everything, the soul of everything, the root of everything, the scaffolding on which everything else stands. That is the true. That is the real. And That is *your* Self, *your* Atman, too.

‘That Thou Art, Shvetaketu, *Tat Tvam Asi!*’

‘Tell me more, sir,’ cried Shvetaketu, ‘teach me more!’
‘So be it, saumya,’ said Uddalaka.

‘Put this chunk of salt in a pot of water and come back to me tomorrow.’

‘Consider it done, Father.’

When Shvetaketu came back the next morning, his father said to him: ‘That chunk of salt I gave you yesterday, please bring it to me.’

‘B...but, Father,’ stuttered Shvetaketu, bringing the pot of water to his father, ‘how can I? The salt is gone now – it has completely dissolved.’

‘Take a sip of the water, son, from this side of the pot. How does it taste?’

‘Salty, Father.’

‘Now take a sip from the opposite side. How does it taste?’

‘Salty, Father.’

‘Now dip a finger into the centre of the pot and taste the water. How does it taste?’

‘Salty, Father.’

‘You see, Shvetaketu? The salt is here, there, *everywhere*, in the water, only you do not see it. And so it is with the Supreme Self. It is everywhere, pervades everything, only we do not see it.

‘It is that Supreme Self that is the Self, Atman, of the world. That is the finest, most subtle essence of everything, the soul of everything, the root of everything, the scaffolding on which everything else stands. That is the true. That is the real. And That is *your* Self, *your* Atman too.

‘That Thou Art, Shvetaketu, *Tat Tvam Asi!*’

‘Tell me more, sir,’ cried Shvetaketu, ‘teach me more!’

‘So be it, saumya,’ said Uddalaka.

‘Now consider a man from Gandhara, a stranger to these parts, who has been brought here by someone, blindfolded and left to fend for himself. The poor man goes east, and west, and north, floundering in every direction, not knowing where he is headed, crying out for help. Until some kind person passing by removes his blindfold, and when he asks, points out to him the way to Gandhara. Now, if he is a sensible type of man, this stranger will eventually find his way back, by making sure to check in the villages along his way if he is indeed on the right track, if Gandhara indeed lies in the direction he is going.

‘In exactly the same way is a man in this world, lost, floundering in every direction, not knowing where he is headed, until he finds a teacher to show him the way home. And then he rejoices, for he knows that his time in this foreign land is limited, and that, sooner or later, with the help of his teacher, he will find his way back to where he came from, back to his own Self.

‘It is that Self, whose home lies within you, that is the Self, Atman, of the world. That is the finest, most subtle essence of everything, the soul of everything, the root of everything, the scaffolding on which everything else stands. That is the true. That is the real. And That is *your* Self, *your* Atman, too.

‘That Thou Art, Shvetaketu, *Tat Tvam Asi!*’

‘Tell me more, sir,’ cried Shvetaketu, ‘teach me more!’

‘So be it, saumya,’ said Uddalaka.

‘Now consider a man who is gravely ill. His family gathers around his bedside, one of them asking anxiously, ‘Do you recognize me?’

and another asking the same, ‘Do you recognize me?’ As long as his speech has not merged into his mind, and his mind into his breath, and his breath into heat, and heat into the original Being, he recognizes them. But once speech merges into mind, and mind into breath, and breath into heat, and heat into Pure Being, there is no recognizing any more.

‘It is that Pure Being, into which we all eventually merge, that is the Self, Atman, of the world. That is the finest, most subtle essence of everything, the soul of everything, the root of everything, the scaffolding on which everything else stands. That is the true. That is the real. And That is *your* Self, *your* Atman too.

‘That Thou Art, Shvetaketu, *Tat Tvam Asi!*’

‘**T**ell me more, sir,’ cried Shvetaketu, ‘teach me more!’
‘So be it, saumya,’ said Uddalaka.

‘Now consider a man in handcuffs, being dragged into a public square, with the mob shouting, ‘Thief! Stealer of others’ possessions! Heat the axe for him!’ And if he is indeed a thief, and protests his innocence, and takes hold of the axe, his hand will burn, and everyone will know him for a liar. But if he is innocent, and protests his innocence, then the axe will not burn him, for the truth will protect him like a shield.

‘It is that shining Truth, that ultimate Truth, that Truth that shields and protects, that is the Self, Atman, of the world. That is the finest, most subtle essence of everything, the soul of everything, the root of everything, the scaffolding on which everything else stands. That is the true. That is the real. And That is *your* Self, *your* Atman, too.

‘That Thou Art, Shvetaketu, *Tat Tvam Asi!*’

And Shvetaketu, the beloved son of Uddalaka Aruni, who knew now that, at the very core of his being, at the very root of his existence, he was no different from the nectar in the flowers and the honey in the beehives and the

waters in the rivers and the salt in the sea and the life-sap of the trees and the Truth that protects and the Pure Being into which everything returns and the nothing-everything at the heart of a nyagrodha seed, bowed to his father and his teacher, from whom he had indeed learnt the secret of the Self.

Aum Shantih Shantih Shantih ||

Isn't that a beautiful story? Don't you love the fact that the teacher uses so many examples from daily life, so many metaphors, to explain a concept that he knows the student will find hard to grasp? Doesn't it make you feel all warm and fuzzy that the teacher refers to the student so often as 'saumya' – dear one? [By the way, this is not only because Shvetaketu happens to also be his son – throughout the Upanishads, teachers refer to their students as saumya, and students to their teachers (whether they were human or beast or bird) as 'Bhagavan' – powerful, respected, worshipped, blessed, prosperous (in wisdom) – indicating that the relationship is one based on deep and mutual love, and respect.] Doesn't it send a thrill running down your spine each time you read that tremendous declaration – That Thou Art, *Tat Tvam Asi*?

As you have probably guessed by now, *Tat Tvam Asi* is the third of the four Mahavakyas – Great Pronouncements – of the Upanishads that we have encountered in this book so far. Keep your eyes peeled for the fourth! *PS: Easy-peasy. It has to be part of the next Upanishad, since it is the last one on the list.*

THE AFTERSTORY

In the first section of this chapter – 'The Backstory' – we talked about how the answer to most (all?) questions raised in the Chandogya was 'Brahman'.

Is this the ultimate cop-out by the Vedantic sages, then? Were they in fact pulling a fast one on us all? Were they being deliberately obscure because they did not know the answer themselves?

Not really. In fact, these sages were the first to even engage with the kind of fundamental questions that the Chandogya concerns itself with – Where did the universe come from? What is it made of/pervaded by? What makes it tick? Who are we, really? What is it that allows a ‘physical system’ like the body, which you can touch, see, smell, taste and hear, to produce a ‘mental system’ like the mind and intellect, which you are aware of and can locate in the region of the brain, but cannot see? What is it in turn that allows a ‘mental system’ to produce an ‘emotional system’ that you are aware of but *cannot* locate in the body (do feelings emerge from the brain or from the heart, or from somewhere else altogether)? What is it, or *who* is it, inside each of us that allows us to experience our feelings, thoughts, ideas, memories? What is the nature of reality – how can we call this moment – this present, current moment at which we are reading this particular phrase – real, if it has receded into the past, into dreamlike memory, by the time we are done reading this sentence?

The Vedantins’ answer to all these questions was Brahman, which simply means – Consciousness. (Did you think Brahman meant God? Naaah.) And what does consciousness mean? The thing that allows all humans to be self-aware, the ability that we all have to think of ourselves as ‘I’. Do you know what’s even more remarkable? At least two of the questions that the Upanishads concerned themselves with deeply 2,500 years ago – (1) What is the universe made of/pervaded with?; and (2) What is consciousness? – are two questions that STILL remain among the Top Five Unanswered Questions in science today (google it!).

The Vedantins believed that both ‘Space’ (here and there, inside and

outside, me and you) and ‘Time’ (then and now, today and tomorrow), the two concepts by which we have always measured and understood reality, are both illusions (quantum physics, anyone?) created by our consciousness, which is the only true reality there is. Consciousness, they said, is itself boundless (not limited by space) and timeless (not part of past, present or future) – it has simply always been, and always pervaded everything. In fact, they said, *there is nothing else besides it* – this entire universe, and everything in it, is simply a projection of that Consciousness, an amusing game it plays with itself, as ephemeral as a dream. In a sense, say the Vedantins, the universe, and everything in it, is nothing but a giant VR game!



No, seriously. Here's how it apparently works.

Imagine you are visiting a VR arcade in Jalpaiguri. Imagine you have chosen to play a game that involves a ski contest set in the Swiss Alps. You have snapped on your VR headset, stepped into stationary skis and grabbed a pair of ski poles that you can twist this way and that but are otherwise fixed

to the ground. The game begins, and you instantly find yourself zipping down an expert-level slope. It feels real, sure, all of it – the pines and firs rushing by, the skis under your feet, the poles you are digging into the snow to control your speed, the wind in your hair, even your terror when you sail off the edge of the slope (check your heartbeat and you will find it is elevated), but it is only a dream world, which you can step out of any old time you want to, simply by whipping off your headset. And when the game ends, you know there is no need to be sad, for you can return to it anytime.

What's more, each time you return, you can do so as an entirely different character – a ballet dancer (male), maybe, or a powerful business tycoon (female), or a beggar on the street, covered with sores – in an entirely different setting. You may return to the game for a variety of reasons – because you want to win more points this time, because you want to play a different character, or game avatar, or simply because you are bored, and the game is fun and challenging and gives you something to do. Or you may decide to quit the game entirely, by getting to the most advanced level and winning the maximum number of points, because the novelty has worn off and it has stopped being fun.

The Upanishads tell us that that is exactly what Consciousness, Brahman, is doing – amusing itself, through us, characters that It has imagined and created out of Itself. Which is why, say the sages of the Upanishad, we shouldn't take the world, and ourselves, too seriously. Instead, we should watch everything that is happening, or seems to be happening, around us, and to us, with a certain level of detachment, knowing it is make-believe.

From Shvetaketu's story, we know that the authors of the Upanishads believed that there is absolutely no difference between the original Consciousness that created us and our own consciousness, which allows us to feel and think and experience the world in a very different way from how

everyone else experiences it. If you believe that implicitly (the Vedantins would rather you discovered this ‘truth’ for yourself through contemplation, instead of simply taking their word for it), sorrow cannot hurt you and death cannot scare you. Life becomes a wonderful experience, even a game, to be played at the highest level of focus and dedication, of course – because it would be no fun otherwise – and to be enjoyed thoroughly, through the wins and the losses, but never to be taken too seriously.

Yup, that’s not at all an easy concept to grasp, especially by the mind or the intellect, which are the only two devices most of us use to understand something. But don’t fret – this is just to get you thinking out of the box a little. Keep thinking like that, and one day, you may, who knows, get a glimmer of understanding of what or who Brahman really is, and/or solve some of the most fundamental questions in science.



BRIHADARANYAKA

The Great Forest Upanishad

In which we learn that we should be careful what we wish for, for we are nothing but our deepest desire



Aum!

That is complete, and This is complete,
From That completeness comes This completeness;
If you take completeness away from completeness,
Only completeness remains.

Aum Shaantih Shaantih Shaantih ||

THE BACKSTORY

America, 1911. A bright young American, from one of the country's most privileged families, is accepted into a three-year course of study in Indian philosophy and Sanskrit at Harvard University. He has studied philosophy as an undergraduate in the same college a few years before and already has a Master's degree in English literature. In fact, the twenty-two-year-old has always found refuge in books and reading, because a debilitating medical condition has kept him from enjoying all kinds of fun activities while growing up.

Cut to a decade later. The now-not-so-young man has moved to England and become the toast of the literary community there and back home in America. He is recognized as something of a genius, both as a poet and a social critic, but his personal life is a mess. His marriage is failing, both his wife and he have been diagnosed with nervous disorders that hamper their work, and his spirit is at an all-time low. The couple move out of London into the countryside for a three-month convalescence, and the poet finally has time to work on a 'long poem' that has been brewing in his mind. The megapoem, weighing in at almost 1,000 lines, is as angst-ridden and disillusion-filled as the poet himself, but for the very last section, which ends on a note of hope and a wish for peace.

In October 1922, after it has been polished and trimmed down to about half its length, the weird and wonderful poem is finally published in the first issue of a new British literary magazine that the poet himself has founded. It goes on to become one of the best known, most quoted, most analyzed poems in modern English literature, and establishes its poet as one of the greatest of the twentieth century. It is called 'The Waste Land'.



T.S. Eliot's 'The Waste Land' includes a story from the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad

Yup, the troubled genius we have been talking about all this time is none

other than T.S. Eliot!* And we are talking about Eliot and his epic poem here because the last section of the poem – ‘What the Thunder Said’ – the only part of the poem that isn’t so gloomy, is inspired by a story in the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad (BU)!

(Check out the original ‘What the Thunder Said’ story from the BU at the end of this chapter and then google ‘The Waste Land’ to read the poem, particularly the last section. Make sure you have a good guidebook by your side, for the poem is itself a sprawling forest, riddled with difficult references to this and that.)

*You may be interested to know that he also wrote a lovely book of poems called ‘Old Possum’s Book of Practical Cats’, which was adapted by Andrew Lloyd Webber into the smash-hit musical *Cats*! Ring a bell?

The Brihadaranyaka Upanishad, which is part of the Shukla Yajur Veda and among the oldest Upanishads, lives up to the first part of its name – ‘brihad’, which means vast, ginormous – by being the *largest* of the Upanishads. As for the ‘aranyaka’ part, if you understood it literally, as ‘of the forest’, then the BU is ‘The Ginormous-Forest Upanishad’. That would be appropriate too, for you could spend months and years walking its main path and exploring its many detours. Here’s a startling bit of trivia – together with the also-giant Chandogya, the BU constitutes two-thirds of all the Upanishadic literature that has survived to this day!

Clearly, it would be a futile exercise to try and touch upon all the themes addressed by the BU in its six giant chapters, or adhyayas, in this little book. Instead, we shall focus on a few stories and a few engaging themes. If you want to find out more, go ahead – the BU has been around for almost 3,000 years and isn’t going anywhere anytime soon.

THE STORY

ADHYAYA 1

No such thing as bad breath! – A story about gods and demons

Prajapati, Supreme Father, had children of two kinds – demons and gods. The demons, who were older, were misguided, selfish, grasping and always willing to trample over others; in short, they were not the best role models for their younger siblings. Fortunately, younger siblings are often smarter, so the gods did not look to their brothers, but to their own sweet natures, for guidance, and tried their best to be kind, virtuous and unselfish. Unfortunately, younger siblings are also often bullied, and so it was with the gods. Their older brothers were always snatching things from them – Heaven, for instance. Fed up, the gods decided to perform a big yagna, and overcome their exasperating brothers by means of the power of the High Chant, the Udgitha, Aum.

So the gods went to Speech, and said, ‘O Speech, we beg you, chant the Udgitha for us at the yagna.’ Speech chanted the Udgitha, thus gaining for the gods the great joy that comes from being able to say things. As for itself, Speech asked for the ability to say only what was pleasant, and received it. This threw the demons into a tizzy. ‘With this pleasant Udgatri*, the gods’ yagna is sure to be a success,’ they said, wringing their hands. ‘We can’t let that happen!’ So they rushed at Speech and pitted it with unpleasantness. And that is why we often say awful things.

*The Udgatri, or the priest who chanted the verses of the Sama Veda at the yagna (in this case, Speech), could ask for gifts both for the yajamana (in this case, the gods) and for himself. If the chanting was done right, both would receive the boons they desired.

With their first Udgatri gone, the gods went to Smell, and said. ‘O Smell, we beg you, chant the Udgitha for us at the yagna.’ Smell chanted the Udgitha, thus gaining for the gods the great joy that comes from being able to

smell. As for itself, Smell asked for the ability to smell only what was agreeable, and received it. This threw the demons into a tizzy. ‘With this agreeable Udgatri, the gods’ yagna is sure to be a success,’ they said, wringing their hands. ‘We can’t let that happen!’ So they rushed at Smell and pitted it with disagreeable things. And that’s why we often smell things that make us screw up our noses.

With their second Udgatri gone, the gods went to Sight, and said. ‘O Sight, we beg you, chant the Udgitha for us at the yagna.’ Sight chanted the Udgitha, thus gaining for the gods the great joy that comes from being able to see. As for itself, Sight asked for the ability to see only what was beautiful, and received it. This threw the demons into a tizzy. ‘With this beauty-filled Udgatri, the gods’ yagna is sure to be a success,’ they said, wringing their hands. ‘We can’t let that happen!’ So they rushed at Sight and pitted it with ugliness. And that’s why we often see things that make us weep.

With their third Udgatri gone, the gods went to Hearing, and said. ‘O Hearing, we beg you, chant the Udgitha for us at the yagna.’ Hearing chanted the Udgitha, thus gaining for the gods the great joy that comes from being able to hear. As for itself, Hearing asked for the ability to hear only what was harmonious, and received it. This threw the demons into a tizzy. ‘With this calm Udgatri, the gods’ yagna is sure to be a success,’ they said, wringing their hands. ‘We can’t let that happen!’ So they rushed at Hearing and pitted it with disharmony. And that’s why we often hear things that make us anxious.

With their fourth Udgatri gone, the gods went to the Mind, and said. ‘O Mind, we beg you, chant the Udgitha for us at the yagna.’ Mind chanted the Udgitha, thus gaining for the gods the great joy that comes from being able to think. As for itself, Mind asked for the ability to think only good thoughts, and received it. This threw the demons into a tizzy. ‘With this righteous

Udgatri, the gods' yagna is sure to be a success,' they said, wringing their hands. So they rushed at Mind and pitted it with evil. And that's why we often have terrible thoughts.

The gods, now desperate, went to Prana, the lifebreath, and said. 'O Breath, we beg you, chant the Udgitha for us at the yagna.' Breath, without which there would be neither gods nor demons, chanted the Udgitha, and asked for nothing for itself. This threw the demons into a tizzy. 'With this noble Udgatri, the gods' yagna is sure to be a success,' they said, wringing their hands. So they rushed at Breath and tried to pit it with all manner of vice.



But just as a clod of earth hurled against a rock smashes into bits and flies off in all directions, the demons who rushed at Breath were smashed to bits and destroyed. And that is how the gods won, and the demons were destroyed. Anyone who understands this – that the Breath is the only pure, true thing in the body, and meditates on it – crushes his demons and becomes one with his true Self.

Did you enjoy that story? It seems simple, even simplistic, a 'repeating fable' to keep a child entertained, but it is in fact, like every other story in the Upanishads, deeply symbolic, giving us plenty of food for thought.

From the story, it is clear that while the Upanishadic sages believed that

the eyes, ears, nose and tongue were pure matter, part of the physical body, they thought very differently of Sight, Hearing, Speech and Smell. In fact, they gave these last the status of deities – deities who *enabled* the eyes to see, the ears to hear, the tongue to speak, and so on. It is also clear that the sages believed that these very same faculties, since they had all been infiltrated by demons,* were flawed, limited and not to be entirely trusted.

*And why were they infiltrated by demons? Because they all asked for the wrong boon – they asked to be able to see, hear, smell only what was pleasant, thereby creating room for what was ‘unpleasant’! It is only when you see certain things as pleasant or agreeable that other things, in comparison, become automatically unpleasant and disagreeable. This is really the core message of the Upanishads – there is no ‘other’. Joy is no different from sorrow, agony is no different from ecstasy, you are no different from Brahman. It is only your own delusion, the ‘veil of Maya’, that prevents you from seeing that supreme truth.

Does that mean you cannot believe everything you see or hear? Of course it does! How can you seriously doubt that, living as we are in the age of fake news, where entire videos and sound bytes can be doctored and turn normally gentle people into lynch mobs? But the sages were not talking about the deviousness of 21st century technology in the Upanishads; their beliefs stemmed from something far more basic.

Say you see two schoolmates fighting. Your mind and heart turn instantly against the one whom you see as giving the other a hard time. Sure, our first instinct is to root for the underdog, but it is right or fair to take a stand like that without finding out more? How can you be sure that what you can see and hear at the current moment is all there is to the story? Can your eyes ‘see’ and your ears ‘hear’ the backstory – the circumstances that have led to this showdown? Even the mind, the sages tell us, has been defiled by the demons, and we can agree – the mind is also influenced hugely by our own personal experiences and biases, and therefore cannot be trusted.

What then, can we trust? How can we make sure that we see people and

situations with compassion, clarity and true understanding, and are not swayed by what our senses tell us and what our mind wilfully nudges us towards? By disciplining the senses using the reins of the Mind, which are held by the charioteer called Understanding. One great way to do that, according to sages of every stripe, is the practice of meditation. And the best way to ease your way into meditation, so the ancients tell us, is to close your eyes, shut the world out and bring the entire focus of your attention to your – *ta-daa!* – breath.

For while the senses are not only unreliable but dispensable,* and are withdrawn into the mind in sleep (with the mind itself being withdrawn into the breath in deep sleep), the breath, as long as a man lives, is constant, steadfast and true, never forsaking him, whether he is awake, dreaming, or in deep sleep. What's more, it does not influence, question or judge a man's decisions; it is simply the silent witness to them. To the Vedantins, who equated Brahman with that which was unchanging, everlasting and dispassionate in the cosmos, the breath was the perfect metaphor for the Brahman within the body.

*Remember the story in the Prashna Upanishad where the senses are bragging about how each of them is the greatest, until Prana makes as if to leave the body and all the senses find themselves being dragged out in its wake? The story is repeated in the BU – here, Prana leaving the body is described thus: 'As a great horse pulls up the stakes to which it is tethered when it breaks free, so does Prana uproot all the other senses when it leaves the body.' What a powerful image, don't you think?

How can you get started on your own journey to true understanding? By taking a step back and examining a situation thoroughly before jumping to conclusions. By listening with an open mind and heart to both – or all fifteen – sides of a story before you decide who is right and who isn't (or even that no one side is entirely right or entirely wrong at all). By reflecting on every opinion you are about to express, to examine it for your own ends and biases – are you blaming one person over another because one of them is your

friend or someone you want to impress, or are you crucifying someone simply on the basis of his or her past behaviour? By not letting yourself be influenced by your emotions – anger, fear, hate, love. That is how you crush your demons and nourish your gods, both of whom live within you.

And can you guess what would really help you do all of the above? Exactly! Taking several deep, calming breaths!

So that's where it comes from! – A most familiar verse from the BU

Below, reported as it is written, is part of the twenty-eighth paragraph of the third Brahmana of the first adhyaya of the BU. You don't need to remember all that, but as you read, enjoy the goosebumps from realizing that a Sanskrit verse you have heard or sung, perhaps with no understanding of it, has been chanted by people for almost 3,000 years! The nicest part? It is addressed to no particular god! You can invoke your own favourite god when you recite it, or simply call upon the cosmic energy that pervades the universe to light your way in life.

Now comes the chanting of the mantras for purification. When the priest of the Sama Veda sings the introductory verses of the Saman, the yajamana of the sacrifice must silently recite to himself these three verses from the Yajur Veda:

Asato maa sad gamaya
Tamaso maa jyotir gamaya
Mrityor maa-amritam gamaya

From the unreal (asat), lead me to the real (sat),
From darkness (tamas), lead me to the light (jyoti),
From death (mrityu), lead me to immortality.

The unreal, verily, is death, and the real is immortality, so when the yajamana says, ‘Lead me from the unreal to the real’, what he really means is, ‘Lead me from death to immortality!’ or, in other words, ‘Make me immortal!

Darkness is death, and light is immortality, so when he says, ‘Lead me from the darkness to the light’, what he really means is, ‘Lead me from death to immortality’, or, in other words, ‘Make me immortal!

The third line reads ‘Lead me from death to immortality’, and there is nothing obscure about that.

Simple, straightforward and radiant, the prayer – often referred to as the Pavamana Mantra or the Chant of Purification – asks not for wealth or fame or health or happiness, but enlightenment – a mind that sees clearly, an intellect that is able to distinguish between right and wrong, an awareness that is illumined by true understanding. Seriously, what greater treasures exist on earth and in Heaven than these?

PS: Do you know where else you might have heard this mantra? It was part of the soundtrack of the third and final film of a smash-hit, cult, sci-fi Hollywood movie franchise! The first of the three movies in the franchise released in 1999, the second and third in 2003. Do you know its name? That’s right! The movie franchise was The Matrix, and the third film, in which this mantra features, was The Matrix Revolutions!

The Matrix movies, written and directed by the Wachowski Brothers (today, after having transitioned into women, they are known simply as the Wachowskis), were path-breaking in many ways, including for their many references to philosophical and religious ideas from all over the world.

You can hear Asato Maa being chanted (though in a very different way from its traditional chanting) when the end credits of Revolutions begin to roll. The rest of the song of which this mantra is the chorus also contains

mantras from three other Upanishads – the Isha, the Kena and the Katha.

In fact, the core concept of the film’s plot is that the reality that humans believe is real is only a simulated reality called The Matrix, created by intelligent machines – if that reminds you of the core concept of Vedanta, which says that the reality that humans believe is real is only an illusion called Maya, you are not alone. Also, much of the film revolves around the waking, dreaming and deep- sleep states, which makes one wonder if the writers were inspired by the Mandukya Upanishad!



The Big Fat Secret the gods don’t want you to discover

Like most other Upanishads, a lot of the BU is constructed as a dialogue between teacher and student. Sometimes, the teacher and student are identified. More often, the ‘dialogue’ becomes a conversation between the narrator and the reader, with the narrator himself asking questions that the reader might have wanted to, and then going on to answer them. This is one such dialogue.

‘Right. Let’s say I take your word for it that a man will become whole, infinite, realized, by knowing Brahman. That begs the question – “What did Brahman himself/herself/itself know that enabled it to become Brahman?”’

‘Good question! You see, in the beginning, when there was only Brahman and no one else, Brahman thought to itself, “Aham Brahmasmi – I am Brahman”, and that very self-awareness made it whole, infinite, self-realized. The same thing happened to the gods who came after. When they realized who and what they really were, they said, wonderingly, to themselves, “Aham Brahmasmi – I am Brahman,” and became whole. It is the same among the

wisest seers, and among ordinary humans too. The moment a man realizes “Aham Brahmasmi – I am Brahman”, he becomes the whole universe. Not even the gods can do anything about it then, for he becomes them!

‘If a man bows before another deity, however, saying “He is one, I am another,” then he doesn’t get it at all. As men use cattle and sheep for their own ends, thus do the gods use such men for their own ends. Knowing how painful it is for a man to lose even a single head of cattle, imagine how much more painful for the gods to lose even one such man!

‘And that’s why the gods are not at all happy with the prospect of men getting to know this ultimate truth, this great secret – Aham Brahmasmi.’

Aham Brahmasmi – I am Brahman – is considered the fourth of the Great Pronouncements – or Mahavakyas – of the Upanishads. It is also, along with Tat Tvam Asi, the best known of the Mahavakyas. But is that all it means? How can you get Aham Brahmasmi into your day-to-day life?

The answer lies in the very first lines of the answer above. ‘Brahman thought to himself “I am Brahman”, and he was.’

A story with two endings illustrates this rather well.

Version 1: An anxious student approached his teacher and asked him, ‘Do you think I can achieve this (task)?’ Like every good teacher, this one too turned the question right back at the student – ‘What do *you* think?’ The student pondered for a moment. ‘I don’t think I can.’ The teacher smiled. ‘There’s your answer. You cannot (achieve the task).’

Version 2: An anxious student approached his teacher and asked him, ‘Do you think I can achieve this (task)?’ Like every good teacher, this one too turned the question right back at the student – ‘What do *you* think?’ The student pondered for a moment. ‘I think I can.’ The teacher smiled. ‘There’s

your answer. You can.’

The moral of the story is clear enough. It is your own self-belief (or lack of it) that makes things possible (or not). Believe that you are whole, complete in yourself, content in yourself, that you have no need for validation or approval from anyone else (or a god outside of you, like the misguided man in the story) and you will be whole, you will be Brahman – it’s as simple as that!

But, be warned, says the BU, the gods will try their best to foil your attempts at self-realization. They will put in your way the demons of fear, self-doubt, guilt, weariness, all of which will weaken your will and make you say ‘I don’t think I can’ – for if they did not, who would go to them asking for solace and strength, and offer them coconuts and prayers and gold? Who would they then send scurrying to temples and other places of worship?

But, say the Upanishads, if you stay strong, and disciplined, and focused, and give your hundred per cent to everything you do, treating your work as a great sacrifice that you are performing for the good of the universe, and expect nothing in return for it – sooner or later, the veil of Maya will fall away, and you will discover that you contain everything you need – love, strength, peace, contentment – within yourself. Brahman will bloom within you, luminous and radiant, and the universe will resound with the joy of your discovery – *Aham Brahmasmi!*



ADHYAYA 2

Not all the treasures of the world – A conversation between Maitreyi and Yagnavalkya

Once, the great sage Yagnavalkya sat his wife Maitreyi down beside him and

said to her, ‘Maitreyi, I have completed my responsibilities as a householder and it is time for me to move on to the next stage in my life.* I want to spend more time henceforth in reflection and contemplation, and I will not be able to stay here much longer. But before I go, I want to divide all that I have between you and Katyayini.’

*According to the ancient Indian texts, human life is divided into four age-based phases or stages, called ashramas. Each ashrama has recommended activities and pursuits, combining into a ‘complete’ experience through a lifetime.

For the first twenty-four years of his life (in today’s terms, approximately until he finishes a Master’s degree), a young man is expected to focus entirely on his education. He is expected to remain single and not be distracted by romantic relationships. (Plus, no smartphones.) This is the student stage, or the Brahmacharya Ashrama.

For the next twenty-four years, until the age of forty-eight, a man is expected to live in the larger community – finding a job, getting married, educating his children, taking care of his parents and contributing to society in whatever way he can. This is the busiest, most productive stage of a man’s life, when he works to sustain both the generation before and after him, and raise worthy children to sustain the community in the future. This is the householder stage, or the Grihastha Ashrama.

For the next twenty-four years, between the ages of forty-nine and seventy-two, a man is expected to gradually hand over the reins of his household and/or his business to the next generation, and take on the role of an adviser, always available to the young ‘uns when they need him, but otherwise allowing them to run their own ships in the way they think fit, so that they in turn can flower into their own full potential. Thus gradually distancing himself from attachment to his family and home in the retirement stage, or Vanaprastha (say vaana-prasta) Ashrama, he prepares for the next life-stage. (In the story, this is the stage Yagnavalkya wanted to move to, which is why he wanted to divide his possessions among his wives).

From seventy-two onwards, a man is expected to remove himself from all ties of family and society (at least emotionally, if not physically) and lead the equivalent of an ascetic life, full of prayer, reflection and contemplation. This is the renunciation stage, or Sannyasa Ashrama.

Pretty neat, don’t you think? The age divisions and recommendations seem to echo what naturally happens as people get from the age of twenty-four to forty-eight to seventy-two, especially with regard to their attitudes. Sure, you are still at the Brahmacharya stage, but you can see what those in other ashramas are doing and thinking by taking a look at your older cousins, parents and grandparents. Make sure you include the women too – now that they are just as educated as men are, the ashrama recommendations would apply to them too.

Maitreyi was heartsick to hear of her husband’s imminent departure, but she

had always known this day would come, so she took the blow with good grace and asked, ‘You talk of dividing your property, sir, but tell me this – if the wealth of the entire earth were mine, would that make me immortal?’

‘Eh?’ said Yagnavalkya. ‘What kind of a question is that? If all the wealth of the earth were yours, you would simply live, while you were alive, like very rich people do. But you certainly would not be able to buy immortality, however wealthy you were.’



‘What will I do with half your property, then?’ said Maitreyi. ‘I want none of it. Give it all to Katyayani, who loves such things. As for me, teach me something that will help me become immortal.’

‘Beloved!’ cried Yagnavalkya, well pleased. ‘You have always been dear to me and now you have made yourself dearer by asking me to share what is closest to my heart. Come, sit beside me, and I will tell you what you want to know. But make sure not just to hear what I say, but also to reflect on it as I speak.’

Maitreyi nodded. ‘I promise, sir.’

‘Why does a wife love her husband, dearest? Not for his sake, but her own – he makes her Self happy. Why does a husband love his wife? Not for her sake, but his own – she makes his Self content.’

‘Why are children loved, dearest? Not for their own sake but their parents’ – they make their parents’ Self joyful.

‘It is the same with everything else – priestly power and royal power, wealth and the gods, the universe and all the creatures in it – they are all loved not for their own sake, but for the sake of one’s own Self.

‘Is it not clear, then, Maitreyi, that it is the Self that one should direct one’s attention towards? That it is the Self that should be thought about, reflected on, meditated upon? That once one knows the Self, one understands everything else? That it is only by knowing yourself that you know the world?

‘Fie on the priest who believes his priestly power comes from outside of his Self. Fie on the king who believes his royal power comes from outside of his Self. May the gods forsake anyone who believes the gods live outside of his Self. May all creatures abandon anyone who believes that those creatures lie outside of his Self. May the Infinite reject anyone who believes that the Infinite rests outside of his Self.

‘You see, Maitreyi, as the sound of a drum cannot be fully understood by someone who knows not both drum and drummer, neither can one fully understand the sounds of a conch or a lute without knowing both instrument and musician.

‘As clouds of smoke arise, unbidden, from a fire overlaid with damp fuel, so from the breath of Brahman have arisen, effortlessly, all the Vedas, Upanishads, poetry, history, ancient lore, the arts and the sciences.

‘As all the waters converge into the ocean, all touch into the skin, all smells into the nose, all visible forms into sight, all sounds into hearing, all thoughts into the mind, all wisdom into the heart, all action into the hands and all movement into the feet, so does everything in the universe converge into the Self.

‘As a lump of salt thrown in water cannot be taken out of it again, although it makes every drop of that water salty, even so, beloved, does the individual Self dissolve in limitless Being and cannot be separated from it, although that Being itself carries in it the essence of every individual self. The Being arises at birth with the Self and departs with it at death. After death, therefore, there is no separate self, no awareness, nothing.’

Maitreyi blanched. ‘After death, there is nothing? You are confusing me, sir, I am bewildered.’

‘Reflect once more, calmly, on what I have said, beloved – where does the sense of separateness come from? From the limited body, which perceives itself as different, separate, from everything around it. But once the body is gone and the Self dissolves into the Immense Being, there is no “other” to perceive, don’t you see? When there is no other to see, and no eyes to see it with, what can you see? Nothing. When there is no other to smell, and no nose to smell it with, what can you smell? Nothing! When there is no other to hear, and no ears to hear it with, what can you hear but nothing? When there is no other to think about, and no mind to think about it with, what is thought but nothing? When there is no other to know, and no intellect to know it with, what can you know but nothing?’

‘Tell me, Maitreyi, by means of what can one perceive the one who perceives it all? How, beloved, can one know the Knower when he himself has become it?’

In this famous Upanishadic story, known not only for Yagnavalkya’s insights into what it means to be immortal but also for the fact that it is one of the few stories that features a woman as the seeker of truth, Maitreyi, who is not interested in worldly possessions, asks her husband to teach her how to go

beyond death.

And what can we take away from his answer? That as long as we think we are our little, flawed, limited, perishable bodies, we most certainly cannot, will not, be immortal, for the body decays and dies from minute to minute, until one day, it stops functioning altogether. But once we understand that who we are, *what* we are, is pure energy, pure consciousness, pure being – everything changes!

Sure, for the present, we are energy and consciousness contained in a physical body (and it is that energy that is the reason the body is able to do what it does). But when the body is gone, the energy that sustained us simply goes back to becoming part of the energy that sustains the world, pushing plants up from the soil, keeping the earth in her orbit and the sun and moon in theirs, bringing atoms together to make molecules, giving tigers the power to roar and deer the strength to run.

The great advantage of being able to see yourself as cosmic energy is the sudden and stunning realization that everything and everyone you see around you is in fact the same energy, poured into a dazzling, mind-boggling, fabulously diverse and absolutely wonderful array of bodies and forms and shapes. It is the same energy that enables each of those forms to do its own fascinating set of things, just as it is the same electricity that enables a vacuum cleaner to suck up dust and an X-ray machine to see your bones. Once that switch is thrown, you will see everyone and everything as part of a multi-armed, multi-headed, multitalented, multidimensional, limitless you.

That cosmic energy, so the Upanishads tell us, has been around since before the earth existed, is the reason the world exists and will be here well after the universe as we know it is gone. And since you have now had the realization that YOU are that cosmic energy, it stands to reason that you will be around forever too. Does that sound a bit like immortality? You bet it

does!



ADHYAYA 3

It ain't bragging if you can back it up!

If you aren't familiar with that line above – 'It ain't bragging if you can back it up!' – it is actually a well-known quote by one of the most charismatic, cheeky and beloved sportspeople of the twentieth century, the iconic Muhammad Ali, but it works quite well as a title for this story from the BU. This story also features the sage Yagnavalkya,* this time interacting with the only other female seeker we find mention of in the Upanishads, Gargi Vachaknavi. Here's how it goes.

*It is believed, in fact, that it was Yagnavalkya himself who composed the BU, or at least a large part of it, since his conversations form such a big part of the Upanishad.

Janaka, the king of Videha, had just finished a great sacrifice and was handing out generous gifts to all and sundry. Many learned sages had come from as far afield as Kuru and Panchala, and Janaka, eager to find the wisest among them, fastened bags containing ten gold coins each between the horns of a thousand cows, drove them all into a pen and announced, 'These cows are for the wisest among those present here. Step forward and take them if you believe you are the one!'

While everyone else hesitated, Yagnavalkya stepped forward and said to one of his students, in a voice that carried, 'Drive the cows home, son.' The boy cracked a huge smile. 'Hail the prince among sages!' he said, and joyfully drove the cows away. Furious, the other sages came down upon Yagnavalkya like a tonne of bricks. 'The man is beyond presumptuous!' they

fumed among themselves. And at him, they snarled, ‘You really believe you are the wisest among us, do you?’ Yagnavalkya shrugged. ‘We all bow to the wisest one here, I’m sure,’ he said, ‘but we know, don’t we, that what we are all really after are the cows?’

The irreverent answer, which hurt more because it was the truth, only served to get the other sages even more riled up. ‘Let’s have a debate, then, and we shall see if you are indeed the wisest!’

Thus began a right royal debate at King Janaka’s court. It lasted for days, with the most learned men in the land – Ashvala, Arthabhaga, Lahyayani, Chakrayana, Kahola, Uddalaka* – questioning Yagnavalkya on the technicalities of the yagna layout and chants, and the nature of Death, Brahman and the Self. He answered them all satisfactorily and they were all forced to eventually admit defeat.

*Remember him from the Chandogya Upanishad? That’s right, Shvetaketu’s father!

Then Gargi Vachaknavi stepped forward. ‘Respected brahmins,’ she addressed the gathering. ‘I am going to ask this man two questions. If he answers them satisfactorily, know that any further debate is a futile exercise.’



The gathering bowed. Gargi was a highly respected sage, a woman of great wisdom, and most of them were willing to take her at her word that if Yagnavalkya answered her questions, he was indeed the wisest in the hall.

Turning to Yagnavalkya, Gargi said, ‘Like a fierce warrior of Kashi or Videha would rise to fell an enemy, I rise to fell you, Yagnavalkya, with two questions that are as the two deadliest arrows in the warrior’s quiver.’

‘Shoot, Gargi,’ said Yagnavalkya.

And Gargi asked her two questions, which Yagnavalkya answered expertly, winning her respect. At the end of it, Gargi turned to the gathering and said: ‘Respected brahmins, consider yourself fortunate if you get away simply by paying this man homage. For I declare this, here and now – no one can defeat Yagnavalkya in a debate about Brahman.’

But Shakalya, a stubborn pandit, insisted on challenging him, and came, expectedly, to a bad end.

Then Yagnavalkya turned to the august assembly and said: ‘Respected brahmins, is there anyone else among you, who would challenge me, singly

or together?’ And he added, cheekily, ‘Or I could question you, if that’s what you prefer.’

This time around, however, not a one dared to say a word. And Yagnavalkya returned home, laden with gifts, having gained the respect not just of the gathered sages but of the great King Janaka himself.

You see? It ain’t bragging if you can back it up! But if you aren’t quite sure you can, it’s best you stay silent. Shakalya’s ‘bad end’ was having his head shatter into a thousand pieces, and no one wants that, really.



ADHYAYA 4

Can you change your destiny? Of COURSE you can!

So thoroughly had Yagnavalkya succeeded in impressing King Janaka at the impromptu debate that the latter became the sage’s fan for life. The BU features several other conversations between the two, with Yagnavalkya as teacher and Janaka as starry-eyed acolyte, plying his guru with thousands and thousands of cows in return for answers to his (never-ending) questions.

Here is an excerpt:

One day, Yagnavalkya paid a visit to King Janaka, thinking, ‘Today, I will not answer any of his questions.’ But then he remembered that the last time he had been at Janaka’s court, he had offered the king a boon and the king had asked for nothing but the right to ask the sage questions. Yagnavalkya sighed, resigning himself to another volley.

The moment he had been respectfully received and seated, Janaka began.

‘Yagnavalkya, what is the source of light for a man in this world?’

‘The sun, Your Majesty,’ replied Yagnavalkya. ‘For it is by his light that a man sits, goes out, does his work, and returns.’

‘Quite right,’ said the king. ‘And when the sun sets, what is the source of light for a man in this world?’

‘The moon, Your Majesty, for it is by his light that a man sits, goes out, does his work, and returns.’

‘Quite right. And when the sun and moon have both set?’

‘Then fire is our light, Your Majesty, for it is by that light that a man sits, goes out, does his work, and returns.’

‘And when the fire has died out?’

‘Then the voice is our light, for even if it is too dark for a man to see his own hand, he goes straight to the spot from where he hears a voice.’

‘Quite right. But when the sun has set and the moon is dark and the fire is out and the voice is stilled, what then is the source of a man’s light?’

‘His Self, or Atman, your Majesty. It is by the light of the Self that a man sits, goes out, does his work, and returns.’

‘And what Self is this?’

‘That person that is neither the body nor the mind, neither sight nor hearing, but pure awareness, the light within the heart – he is indeed the Self.’

And so it went, with Janaka asking question after question, and Yagnavalkya, bound by his promise to the king, answering him patiently. They talked of the exact mechanics of Death and the blissful world of Brahman where the Self reposes between one life and the next. They discussed the oneness of the Self with Brahman and how there was really no difference at all between the two. And then they came to the tricky question of how exactly a man’s destiny is fashioned. Was a man’s destiny determined even before he was born? Was there any way he could change it? How did one man become ‘good’, and another ‘bad’?

And Yagnavalkya said, ‘O King, what a man becomes depends entirely on his own actions. If his actions are good, he himself becomes good; if they

are bad, he himself becomes bad.'

'But what makes a man act?' asked the king. 'What if he performs no action at all?'

'Ah, but a man cannot perform "no action at all",' smiled Yagnavalkya. 'For the root of all action, good or bad, is desire, and a man is made of nothing but his desire.'

'Know this, Your Majesty,

A man is nothing but his deep, driving desire.

As is his desire, so is his will,

As is his will, so is his action,

As is his action, so is his destiny.'

The dire words, so simple but so powerful, so ruthless, echoed in the good king's head. Yagnavalkya was right – it was really as simple as that. Learn to control your desire and you can control your destiny – that's all there was to it!

Janaka bowed low before the great sage. 'I salute your wisdom, blessed one,' he said, in a voice brimming with gratitude, 'I beg you, accept me as your slave.'

Learn to control your desire, and you can control your destiny! Really? Yes! Control your desire for TV time before an exam, and you will be able to focus better on your studies and crack the exam. Control your desire for junk food, and you will be healthier. On the flip side, don't control your desire to sneak a look into your friend's answer paper, and be marched off the principal's office. *Don't* control your desire to lie to your parents, and suffer a truckload of guilt over it.

Even situations where controlling your desire seems like a bad idea could end up working for you! For instance, let's say you control your desire for that pricey new phone, becoming an outcast among your friends as a result. *(PS: If this happens, you might want to review those friendships.)* Now, you can cry quietly about it, or you can let your parents know how their action (of not getting you a new phone) has ruined your life. Chances are, your parents will be guilted into getting you something else that you really want,* which they may not have otherwise. See what you did there? You controlled your destiny!

*You wish! – Signed, Your Parents

Jokes apart, think very, very carefully about your actions before you do them, for you become your actions. And it is the little, everyday actions that count just as much, or more, than the big, grand, one-off actions. 'I'm going to cheat a little today, and that's OK, because from tomorrow I'm totally going off it,' may sound good as an excuse for cheating when you say it to yourself, but don't be fooled – in the grand scheme of things, every single action counts.

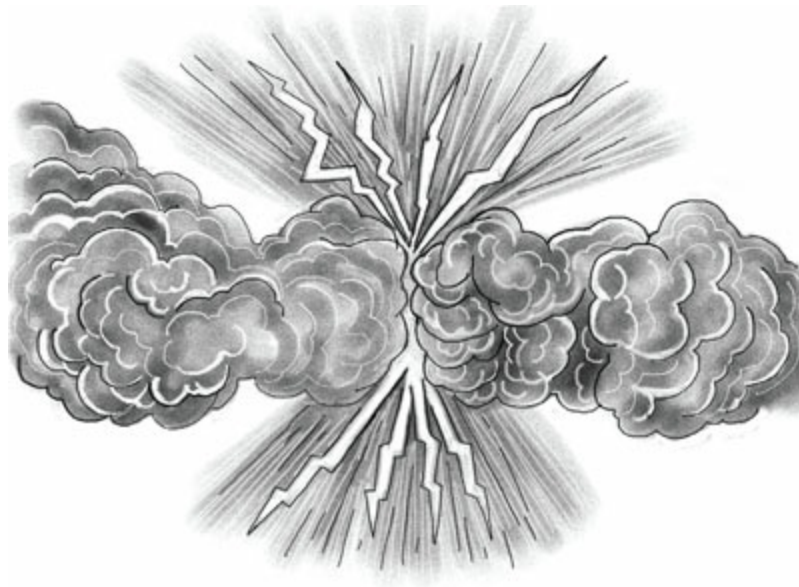
This is not in the sense that there is someone sitting in the clouds recording your every deed in a giant register, which she will use to decide whether you will go to Heaven or Hell after you die, but in the sense that *you* can decide, for *yourself*, how you want to fashion your life, right here on earth, and then proceed to make that dream come true – *simply by being vigilant about your actions.*

That's a tremendous superpower. Use it mindfully!



What The Thunder Said

One of the shortest, simplest and most heart-warming stories in the Upanishads is the one below, the very same one that influenced Eliot so deeply. Enjoy!



Once, in aeons past, the children of Prajapati the Creator – gods, humans and demons – lived with him as his students. When they came to the end of their education, they each went to him, seeking a final piece of advice.

‘Venerable One,’ said the gods, ‘What advice do you have for us?’

‘Da,’ said the Supreme Father. And then he asked them, ‘Have you understood?’

‘We have, Father,’ they said. ‘Da is for Damyata (say daam-yata). You are telling us to exercise self-restraint.’

‘You have understood,’ said Prajapati, and he was well pleased, for his sons, the gods, were unruly and given to excess, and indulged too often and prodigally in the pleasures of the flesh.

Then it was the turn of the humans.

‘Father,’ said the humans. ‘What advice do you have for us?’

‘Da,’ said he. And then he asked them, ‘Have you understood?’

‘We have,’ his human sons answered. ‘Da is for Datta. You are asking us to give, and give generously.’

‘You have understood,’ said Prajapati, and he was well pleased, for his sons, the humans, were inclined to be selfish and greedy, hoarding more than they needed, never letting go of what they considered their own.

Then it was the turn of the demons.

‘Most respected sir,’ said the demons. ‘What advice do you have for us?’

‘Da,’ said the Creator. And then he asked them, ‘Have you understood?’

‘We have, sir,’ his demon sons answered. ‘Da is for Dayadhvam. You are telling us to be compassionate.’

‘You have understood,’ said Prajapati, and he was well pleased, for his sons, the demons, had a cruel streak, and did not hesitate to harm and kill in the pursuit of their own ends.

Each stormy night, so that Prajapati’s children never forget, the divine voice of Thunder repeats the supreme teaching – ‘Da-Da-Da! Damyata! Datta! Dayadhvam!’

Aum Shantih Shantih Shantih ||

Da-da-da! Bet you are never going to be able to hear the voice of thunder again without going – Umm, *what* were those teachings again?

And that’s great, for *all* three teachings are really meant only for us, humans! You see, each of us contains in ourselves both god and demon – for are we not all, at different times, given to indiscipline, excess, selfishness, greed and even cruelty – in thought, word and deed?

When we live life king-size, going overboard with food, fizzy drinks,

money, laughter, device-time, we are displaying the god side of our personalities – we are generous at that point, unlike humans, and perhaps even compassionate, unlike the demons, for we ourselves are so full of joy. But there is such a thing as ‘too much of a good thing’ – excess drains us in ways we do not immediately realize. When you feel you are overdoing something, therefore, pause, gather yourself, and pull back, remembering the teaching – Da! Damyata!

When we get all petty and possessive about what we consider ‘ours’, we are displaying the human side of our personalities. We could be practising severe self-restraint, which makes us godlike, at the same time, and being compassionate too, thus keeping our demons at bay, but our small-mindedness will give us away and reveal us to be mostly human. When you catch yourself being too human, remember the teaching – Da! Datta! – and let go.

When we are unnecessarily mean to someone, or fly into a rage, we are displaying the demon side of our personalities. Even if we are being highly disciplined at that time – as Prajapati asked the gods to be – or being generous with our time or money – as Prajapati asked the humans to be – the fact that we are essentially being cruel outs us as demons and brings about our downfall. The next time you are about to say or do something that could hurt someone, remember the teaching – Da! Dayadhvam! – and check yourself.

One two – da-da-da

Let’s do – da-da-da

Me and you – da-da-da

Doo-roooo...

[Sung to the tune of Usha Uthup’s ‘Cha-cha-cha’ from the film Shalimar (1978).]

Cool theme song for life, wot?

AND, IN CONCLUSION

There. We have now wrapped up a first, brief and by no means exhaustive exploration of some of the most ancient philosophical texts in the world. If you have read this far, what are you feeling just now?

A sense of:

- Achievement ('Well done, me! I never thought I'd last!')
- Empowerment ('Ha! I can totally bluff my way through any conversation on the Vedas and Upanishads now – try me!')
- Wonder ('Man, those ancients figured out some pretty cool things about life, the universe, and everything, hanh?')
- Surprise and delight ('Heyyy, several bits and pieces of the Vedas and Upanishads [V&U] were already familiar to me – mantras, stories, characters, concepts... Who knew?')
- Confusion ('Umm, I still don't get any of it, sorry!')
- Validation ('I always suspected that the ancient Indian texts were wise, wonderful, relevant, secular, liberal, egalitarian/random, pointless, irrelevant, narrow, divisive, patriarchal – and this confirms it.')

You may be feeling one or more of these emotions, or something entirely else, but here's the thing – whatever it is you are feeling, you are completely entitled to it; *don't let anyone tell you otherwise!* What you can, and should, be happy about is that your opinion comes from having put in the time and effort to explore something (in this case, the V&U) *by yourself* – you are not echoing someone else's opinion, or taking someone else's word for what they are about.

What if it turns out that your opinion (about the V&U or anything else) is different from that of your friends or family? That's perfectly fine – don't doubt yourself or go against what you feel just to hang with the herd. Each of us processes and understands things based on our individual nature, upbringing, exposure, level of understanding, phase of development and past experiences, and that is as it should be. It would be a boring world if everyone understood or reacted to things in exactly the same way.

And if you feel a little divided in your own mind? That there are parts of the V&U that you love and others that you don't feel comfortable with at all? Why, that's easy! Just take from them the lessons that you think are useful and illuminating, and set the rest aside. To reject the whole simply because there are bits of it you don't like or agree with seems a little shortsighted, especially because no one, least of all the sages of the V&U, is asking you to believe everything they have said.

Only make sure you approach every new field of study – and event, and situation – with a mind as open and non-judgemental as possible. Only make sure you understand that just as you are entitled to your opinion, so is everyone else. Only make sure never to stop seeking the truth, and to review, at

regular intervals, what you believe to be the truth.

Only make sure you never forget that you are not small or insignificant or irrelevant, but that you carry within you the potential to be – that you can *choose* to be – luminous, glorious, MAGNIFICENT!

Have a fabulous life!



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

‘The divine force that lives within you, just as it lives in every other being, will turn you around like a puppet on a stick, and make you follow your nature – don’t ever doubt that. Why do you fight it, Arjuna?’ – Krishna in the Bhagavad Gita, Chapter 18

After my book *The Gita for Children* was published in 2015, everyone I knew – and dozens I didn’t – urged me to write more books in the same vein. I balked. Determined not to be ‘typecast’, I busied myself writing other books for children – on exciting topics like economics, life skills, history, maths – enjoying myself thoroughly in the bargain. But I realized in a while that I was fighting a losing battle. When my editor Vatsala Kaul Banerjee brought up the matter of a book on the Vedas and Upanishads for children for the 57th time – Krishna’s quote above might just as well be attributed to her – I capitulated, feeling a huge sense of lightness, gratitude and joy as I returned to push a teeny bit further into a landscape I had come to love so much.

It wasn’t easy. If I had had very little exposure to the Bhagavad Gita before I wrote *The Gita for Children*, I had even less to the V&U. Unlike the Gita, which is contained in a compact 700 verses, the V&U are huge, sprawling and abstract, a *brihad aranya* that felt at first far too intimidating to negotiate. I would not have had the courage to skirt even the outermost edge of that metaphysical forest, as I have now, if not for the guidance, encouragement and support of a great many wise and wonderful people, and many thanks are due to them.

- As always, to Vatsala Kaul Banerjee, mentor, friend and fine human being, who not only believes, generously and unconditionally, but also puts in the punishing toil that keeping that faith entails – I owe you more than you will know,
- To Sayan Mukherjee, who cheerfully came on board again for this book, even though he was in the middle of moving homes between continents, and produced all the imaginative artwork – God knows illustrating abstract concepts isn't easy – that you see, including the dazzling cover,
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- To my aunt-in-law Tara Kini, whose own immersion in and love of the Principal Upanishads has led to three beautifully crafted stage and musical performances based on them, which I have had the pleasure and privilege

to watch, enjoy and learn from,

- To Anando Banerjee, who also reviewed the manuscript (and was horrified that there was no mention of The Matrix Trilogy in its first draft), for enjoying it so much and being so gung-ho about the need for it to exist;
- To my long-suffering family and friends, who, as my sounding boards, were particularly battered this past year, for having borne their burdens so cheerfully; my children, I hope, will eventually recover from their scars, and maybe even read the book some day,
- And always, always, a deep and most heartfelt debt of gratitude and love to the land that so long ago spawned the universal truths that sustain her children still, and to the thousands of nameless sages who, once they had seen beyond the walls, spared no effort to make that glorious, edifying and empowering vision available to all seekers.

Aum Shaantih Shaantih Shaantih ||

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- And although they cannot be classified as bibliography in the strictest sense, this book has been inspired and informed by dozens and dozens of

illuminating discourses on Vedic philosophy and the Upanishads by several wonderful speakers, thinkers, scientists, philosophers, historians, and men of religion.



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ROOPA PAI is the author of several books for children, including the much-acclaimed, award-winning bestseller, *The Gita for Children*. Her books, on topics as diverse as history, mathematics, science, economics and sci-fi fantasy, are enjoyed by adults just as much as they are by children. Of all the Mahavakyas in the Upanishads, her favourite is ‘Prajnanam Brahma – Knowledge is God’.

SAYAN MUKHERJEE is an illustrator living in Kolkata and working from his studio. After working in advertising for almost nine years, he went solo with his passion – illustrations. He loves children’s books and loves to create art for kids. Besides Hachette India, he works with publishers like Penguin Random House India, Juggernaut, Tulika Books, Speaking Tiger and Pratham Books, among others. He has a number of sketchbooks and carries them wherever he travels, to preserve some beautiful memories.

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